

ROOTED *in* STRUGGLE



The Translocal Learning Network

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*Learning from Social Movements
in Ghana, South Africa, Guatemala
and Canada*

The Translocal Learning Network



Daraja Press

Published by
Daraja Press
<https://darajapress.com>
Wakefield, Quebec, Canada
2026

© 2026 The Translocal Learning Network
ISBN: 9781998309498 (soft cover)
Cover and interior design: Kate McDonnell

Catalog in Publishing data available from the Library and Archives of
Canada

EU Authorized GPSR Representative: Easy Access System Europe –
Mustamäe tee 50, 10621 Tallinn, Estonia, gpsr.requests@easproject.com.
For EU product safety concerns, please contact us at info@darajapress.com

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Abbreviations

AbM – Abahlali baseMjondolo

ANC – African National Congress

CCDA – Comité Campesino del Altiplano

CLP – Church Land Programme

EDIA – Equity, diversity, inclusivity and accessibility

GNU – Government of National Unity

INDE – National Institute of Electrification

LGBTQIA+ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and all other sexual orientations and gender identities

NGO – Non-governmental Organisation

PAC – Civil Self-Defence Patrols

RAs – Research Assistants

SRAN – Savannah Research and Advocacy Network

SSHRC – Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council
(of Canada)

STFX – St Francis Xavier University

TAMCI – Talensi Community Mining Initiatives

TLN – Translocal Learning Network

YMG – Yenyeya Mining Group

PREFACE

Learning from each other's struggles

This remarkable book enables us to listen into some extraordinary conversations between activists in grassroots social movements in Ghana, South Africa, Guatemala and Canada. For those of us living elsewhere, this is a real gift for understanding ourselves and our own struggles: it is not so unusual to read accounts of movements from below written for global audiences, often by professionals (development workers, journalists, academics) more attuned to those audiences than to the everyday realities of those movements.

Those accounts are not useless: at times publicity can be a matter of life and death, a way to reach new allies or to put pressure on local authorities. But they are very selective, including in which movements professionals pick out as relevant to their own audiences – and because of this, there is often very little *learning* involved, rather a search for new “content” to fit into familiar narratives. In particular, they are rarely about learning how to fight and win – not least because most of those who read these narratives live in very different worlds.

Increasingly in recent decades, there is little overlap between the struggles of the world's poor and the powerful circuits which talk about them and represent them, however sympathetically. The economics of producing a film about grassroots struggles make this very clear, but similar logics affect radical book and magazine publishing (what will sell?), while the attention economy and algorithms of social media, or the logics even of critical academic networks, rarely answer to the needs of shanty-town dwellers, subsistence farmers or migrant labourers – and still less when as so often they circulate not just through English but through what makes sense, what will sell or get likes, in New York or London.

This is precisely why this book matters so urgently. It does not offer us a voyeuristic glimpse into other people's hardships, nor

does it repackage grassroots wisdom for metropolitan consumption. Instead, it invites us into a genuine exchange – one where activists speak directly to one another across continents, not for our benefit, but for their own mutual survival and growth. In a world where the voices of the powerful drown out almost everything else, this book carves out space for something rare: learning that runs in both directions, grounded in shared experience rather than distant observation.

As Thapelo Mohapi's chapter highlights, though, *everybody* thinks; and for grassroots activists, this is a very urgent and practical matter, not simply a question of what opinions are more saleable. Activists and movements desperately need to work out what to do: each crisis, each defeat – but also each victory – raises new questions. While there are many magic solutions on offer – the official answers provided by politicians, the fantasies held out by the media, the offers hinted at by corporations – the reason movements exist is that these do not in fact solve the problem (or rather, they solve the problems faced by the state and capitalism).

As several of the chapters in this book highlight, relying on courts, government, or the “technical expertise” of a multinational is a huge mistake if it means demobilising and handing the initiative over to others. The great strength that communities in struggle have is that combination – of everyday bonds of solidarity grounded in a shared situation, and of increasing collective understanding through self-organisation. This is not a quick process; but it is one which gives the capacity to endure over decades, through violence and defeats, to keep pushing and to win as well as lose – and to transform themselves and their communities in the process, as several chapters highlight.

However, precisely when we are up against violent, unscrupulous and contemptuous opponents who are more powerful, wealthier and more prestigious than our own movements, we cannot afford to learn *everything* for ourselves in the process of struggle: that can come at a very heavy price. As far as we can, we rely on what our own past generations have learned, and on our own daily interactions with each other.

Where we reach the limits of what this can tell us, we can learn best from each other's struggles – through the local process of organising and listening to one another, through making connections to people fighting the same fight further away or from a different gender, ethnic, class etc. situation to our own – and through the translocal learning processes shared in this book. **This is the core gift of *Rooted in Struggle*: not abstract theory, not sentimental inspiration, but practical, hard-won knowledge passed hand-to-hand between those who truly need it.** It matters because it shortens the painful road of learning through defeat alone; it matters because it helps movements recognise that their isolation is not their fate; and it matters because it demonstrates that solidarity is not a feeling but a practice – one that can be built, sustained, and deepened across vast distances.

In the process, new kinds of solidarity can develop, as we learn from one another's struggles, recognise ourselves in one another and identify the shared features of what we are up against in our many different situations. The responses from different organisations in the Translocal Learning Network to one another's chapters in this book, a small reflection of the much wider conversation of which this book is a part, give an indication of this, as do the very valuable comments on the challenges of constructing a multi-lingual conversation without homogenising, allowing each other's difference to remain rather than trying to flatten everything.

Sometimes I meet activists looking for the one book that will tell them what to do – I have to say that there is no book except the one we write, together. *Rooted in Struggle* is part of that wider book, a window on the conversations in the Translocal Learning Network, and a great gift and inspiration to other activists and movements around the world. It is not the final word – it could never be – but it is an indispensable one, precisely because it refuses to speak for movements and instead helps them speak to one another. That is why it matters. That is why you should read it, and more importantly, that is why you should pass it on.

- Laurence Cox, Maynooth, Ireland

CHAPTER 1

Translocal social movement learning: building mutual solidarity and contesting development for social and environmental justice

Sheena Cameron
Jonathan Langdon
Ro Paradela
Wojciech Tokarz

Introducing the Translocal Network and Learning

This book is an invitation. It is an invitation to see how people in localities the world over are coming together, learning from each other, and organising to address the social, economic, and environmental crises we currently and collectively face. It is also an invitation to see the potential of what can happen when people organising in their locality look up from their struggle and see this struggle reflected by others in different localities throughout the world, and decide to reach out, share knowledge and support each other. In the case of this book, this sharing has taken the form of stories.

The current social, economic, and environmental crises impact people all over the world, yet the way in which they impact us varies depending on the local particulars. Protests and local movements have arisen to address these crises, systems of oppression, and developmental challenges as they manifest. At the same time, the fact that we collectively face these crises reinforces our shared humanity and our shared connection with the Earth. In contrast to transnational movements that often minimise local contexts in their efforts to focus on the broader picture, localise movements

are often more effective in making concrete changes in ways that fit the context. All the same, the particulars of local struggles can lead to isolation from others struggling to address these same crises because those affected are so focused on what's in front of them.

In an effort to encourage connection and mutual learning between local movements, the Translocal Learning Network (TLN) serves as an effective social justice framework that attempts to build and maintain local-to-local (i.e. translocal) non-hierarchical connections, as well as encourage learning between movements. The members of the TLN address ongoing and emergent injustices to claim rights, assert agency, and demand representation and the redistribution of resources for marginalised communities in South Africa, Ghana, Guatemala and Canada. Creating shared spaces for connection, support, and learning through the ongoing struggles of each social movement has provided continuous moments of solidarity and opportunities for reimagining being in the world. Through building mutual solidarities, the partners in the TLN produce and demand a new social contract built on a more sustainable form of development that is committed to equity, decolonization, decarbonization, and social and environmental justice. This book brings together the members of the TLN to share experiences that illustrate these struggles, learnings, and successes.

The members of the TLN are:

- **Abahlali baseMjondolo** (the South African shackdwellers movement); Thapelo Mohapi and Mqapheli Bonono have both represented the movement in the network.
- **Church Land Programme** (a South African social justice organisation); Zodwa Nsibande has represented the organisation in the network.
- **Venceremos Development** (a Northern Ghanaian social justice and research organisation); Coleman Agyeyomah and Alhassan Shani have represented the organisation in the network.
- **Savannah Research and Advocacy Network** (a coalition of movements resisting large-scale mining in the Upper East Region of Ghana), who collaborated with Venceremos;



Jon Langdon from STFX, Noah Dameh from Radio Ada, Coleman Agyeyomah from Venceremos, and Yen Nyeya from SRAN meet in Tamale in 2021

Yen Nyeya, Sapak Bugre and Edward Adeti have represented the coalition in the network

- **Radio Ada** (a community radio station on Ghana's coast-line that defends local voice in development); the late Noah Dameh and Amanor Dzeagu have represented the station in the network
- **Comité Campesino Del Altiplano (CCDA** – a Guatemalan peasant and Indigenous rights movement); Leocadio Juracan, Allan Javier, Juracan Morales and Everaldo Morales have represented the movement in the network.

In addition to these movements and organisational members of the TLN, there are a number of academics and students from Canada and South Africa that are also part of the network: Sheena Cameron, Anne Harley, Jonathan Langdon, Ro Paradela and Wojciech Tokarz.



Coleman Ageyomah (Venceremos) and Jon Langdon (STFX) meet with Zodwa Nsibande from the Church Land Programme, and Mqapheli Bonono from Abahlali baseMjondolo in Durban, South Africa in 2023

The Translocal Learning Network of social movements has grown organically through connections that emerged first in 2018 in collaborations between South African and Ghanaian partners, and with Anne Harley, Sheena Cameron and Jon Langdon, and later in 2022 with partners in Guatemala, as well as with Wojciech Tokarz. Although these interactions began with in person exchanges to South Africa and Ghana, especially by Radio Ada visiting Abahlali and CLP in 2018 and Abahlali visiting Radio Ada in 2019, they began to take the shape of online gatherings, especially as the world faced the COVID pandemic. As these online gatherings became more regular and generative, those coming together formalised the meetings into a network, receiving support for this work through funding to study the emergent learning from these gatherings, titled *translocal learning*.

Translocal learning is our network's term for the ways in which we learn from one another through sharing our stories of struggle,

hearing from each other about how these stories both resonate with each other's struggles and also provide unique accounts of these struggles determined by their local contexts. This is not a network where the size of a movement determines the weight of its feedback, but rather a non-hierarchical network where everyone has something to teach and something to learn (c.f. Langdon 2022). Since 2022, our network has been meeting online regularly, and has grown to add partners in Guatemala in 2023 to deepen our reflections across language as well as transnational borders.

This network has been about coming together to share and learn from one another, but has also been about supporting each other through solidarity actions and messages. Members of the network have faced individual and movement/organisational persecution, and other members have organised to decry this persecution and, in some cases, demand members' release from incarceration, and in others, that communities working with partners be left unmolested. Two cases in particular spring to mind where we have come together to support each other: when Mqapheli Bonono of AbM was arrested on trumped-up charges, we joined a slew of other groups and individuals the world over in calling for his release, and for the charges against him to be dropped; when Noah Dameh was targeted by thugs and police for his activism and radio journalism challenging the corporate seizure of resources in Ada, and was later incarcerated related to this activism, we organised to denounce his persecution, and ultimately demanded accountability for the ways in which this persecution led to his death. We further mourned together for his passing, and came together to provide support for his children. These acts of solidarity have played an important role in making our translocal gatherings feel like a community that cares for each other.

In the pages that follow, you will read more of the stories of the individual struggles members of the network are involved in, rather than the stories of the ways we have supported each other. Nonetheless, there are ways in which we have tried to include this mutuality in the stories that follow. This will be shown through the comments that members gave to each other on their contributions

to this collection. These comments can be found at the end of each chapter.

TLN Partners and their chapters

Here we share a bit more about each partner movement/organisation, and give a snapshot of the story they share in their chapter.

Church Land Programme (CLP)

The Church Land Programme (CLP), based in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, is an independent non-profit organisation that works with groups of poor people to create unique responses to their unique situations. The CLP works through a process of animation to affirm, learn from and journey with those who are systematically excluded and impoverished in their struggles related to land and justice. Initiated in 1996 as a joint project between the Association for Rural Advancement and the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness, in response to the land reform taking place in South Africa, the CLP was originally focused on church-owned land while also challenging the Church to engage in the national land question and work for a just and sustainable agrarian transformation.

CLP supports struggles for freedom and efforts to regain collective power. Working from the grassroots through an emancipatory animation practice, CLP ensures that ordinary people, traditionally excluded and marginalised, can make themselves count using democratic and egalitarian principles. Since 2004, CLP's direction has focused on the politics of the poor with its practice guided by an active solidarity with people in the struggles that they define and take forward on their own terms. CLP operates with an open-ended commitment to working with communities. The organisation clusters its work around the thematic areas of land as the basis of life, food sovereignty and livelihoods, learning in struggles, and struggles around natural resources and extractive industries.

Representing CLP, Zodwa Nsibande writes about the impacts of an ongoing corrupt ruling class in South Africa that continues to oppress poor Black South Africans, despite the shift from apart-

heid to a democratic system or a change in political parties. Her chapter, Chapter 2, is titled *Players change but the game remains the same': Current realities of the poor, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal*. This phrase was used by one member of Abahlali baseMjondolo in a meeting about elections and the impact they have on people on the ground, especially those who are marginalised and yet are still expected to participate. The speaker cautioned that even if we change the ruling party, the 'game', the electoral system, remains the same, producing elites. Through vignettes like this, Zodwa illustrates the current realities of the poor, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal, under the ongoing oppressive systems that permeate all aspects of life, including the failing infrastructure, destruction by the extractive industry, and impacts of climate change. Zodwa also speaks about the power of the people through the initiatives that some communities, particularly women's groups, are taking to work together to meet their needs at a community level, instead of relying on the state, industry or external actors.

Savannah Research and Advocacy Network (SRAN) and Venceremos Development

Savannah Research & Advocacy Network (SRAN) emerged from the Coalition of Social Movements in Mining in Ghana's Upper East Region. The organisation is set up to undertake work on research and advocacy for responsible mining by both large-scale extractive and galamsey (illegal) mining in the area. The various people who have developed SRAN come from a number of movements and mining communities, especially in Talensi, in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The organisation's objectives include securing a safe environment for development in Northern Ghana by working with communities to identify and develop alternative livelihoods for the general wellbeing of society, as well as building community and local movements' capacity to enable them to contribute to discussions that affect them (i.e. their rights to a clean environment and a say in natural resource use). Finally, SRAN aims to raise awareness on issues of unsafe resource extraction and assist communities to secure better compensation and resettlement packages when impacted by large scale extraction projects.

SRAN works closely with Venceremos Development, a research and capacity building organisation, in engaging with this work. Venceremos has several decades of experience working with frontline communities to articulate their development visions. The organisation has been helping communities affected by mining, and the movements that emerge from these impacts, to articulate their needs, and advocate for their rights. Venceremos was directly involved in the formation of SRAN and continues to support its work in the Upper East Region.

The interlinked chapters by both Venceremos and SRAN help to reveal the duplicity behind large-scale gold mining operations, and their impact on culture, community and livelihood in this rural northern Ghanaian context and also raise the question why an already existing alternative that exploited the resource through artisanal mining practices was sidelined and not supported. The Venceremos chapter, Chapter 3, written by Coleman Agyeyomah and Alhassan Shani, is titled *The Talensi-Nabdam Gold Rush: Local Complicity, Resource Exploitation, and the Crisis of Dignity*. It focuses on the ways in which local complicity can be as much of a barrier to locally beneficial policies as external corporate power. The SRAN chapter, Chapter 4, written by Edward Adeti and Yen Nyeya, is titled *Gold Slavery in Talensi*. It zeroes in on the voices of those directly impacted by the government and mining company actions.

Comité Campesino del Altiplano (CCDA)

The CCDA is a rural organisation created in the aftermath of the Guatemalan Civil War. It represents more than one hundred thousand Indigenous and non-Indigenous rural families in twenty administrative regions in Guatemala. Using social, cultural, economic, and political actions, the CCDA aims to foster a comprehensive development of rural and Indigenous communities, works to improve their quality of life, promotes gender equity, and fosters respect towards different cultures.

CCDA emerged within the post-Civil War era in Guatemala, which spanned from 1960 to 1996. The war had profound and enduring consequences on the country, leaving an indelible mark on its society, politics, and economy (Konefal, 2016; Nelson,

2009; Ramos, 2013; Sparks, 2019; Stedman, 2002). Fueled by deep-rooted social and economic inequalities, the conflict primarily pitted the government against leftist guerrilla groups, resulting in widespread human rights abuses and a staggering loss of life, particularly among Indigenous communities, which experienced massacres, forced disappearances, and the destruction of their communities (Casaús Arzú, 2009; Metz, 2006; Montejo, 2005).

The post-war era brought challenges of transitional justice, reconciliation, and rebuilding a fractured society, but the scars of the conflict persist, manifested in social divisions, poverty, and ongoing human rights struggles (Henighan, 2018). Despite the signing of peace accords in 1996, the repercussions of the Civil War continue to shape Guatemala's political landscape, influencing issues such as land rights (Brett, 2008), Indigenous rights (Burrell, 2013), and the struggle for justice (Pitarch, 2009). The country remains engaged in the complex process of healing and reconstruction, seeking to build a more inclusive and just society while grappling with the lasting impact of a tumultuous past (Paris, 2004). The CCDA has actively participated in these efforts since its creation.

In Chapter 5, the story that CCDA shares is about the impact of a large-scale development project – a dam – that was implemented during Guatemala's civil war. The chapter is titled *The Guatemalan Countryside: Governments Change, Criminalization Remains*. Río Negro, a community in the way of the dam project, was the subject of a para-military campaign that killed virtually every inhabitant of the community. The chapter asks the question *should we even call this type of project 'development' when it is only through violence that it is achieved?*

Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM)

Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) is a grassroots movement of poor shack-dwellers in South Africa that fights for the rights and dignity of the poor for land, housing, and a democratic society. AbM embodies the concept of ubuhlalism, referring to our humanity as defined by, dependent on, and confirmed in our relationships with those around us (ESCR-Net, 2023). The movement began in early 2005, growing out of the mobilization of a shack settlement

from Kennedy Road in Durban, and has since expanded to four provinces in South Africa with more than 180,000 members as of July 2026. It has links to other landless peoples' social movements around the world and has faced ongoing violent repression including threats, wrongful arrests, and the assassination of many leaders. The consistent targeting and persecution of AbM members has been condemned internationally and has been brought to the attention of Amnesty International and the UN Human Rights Council (ESCR-Net, 2022).

AbM prides itself in being socialist, non-professionalised, autonomous from political organisations and parties, independent of non-governmental organisation (NGO) control, and steadfastly democratic and self-critical. This sentiment has been echoed by academics (Celik, 2010; Gibson, 2008; 2010; 2011). Additionally, AbM has been recognized for the role they play in shaking up the political and social movement landscape in South Africa (Clayton, 2006; Patel, 2008). AbM emphasises the importance of practical solidarity, wherein solidarity must be based on action and not a theoretical concept (ESCR-Net, 2023).

In AbM's Chapter 6, *Nothing about us without us – Everybody Thinks!*, Thapelo Mohapi, the General Secretary of AbM, speaks about how the people most impacted by development, the poor and marginalized, are regularly not involved or considered to be able to think or make decisions about development for themselves, and are made to seem as if they are incapable of determining their own path. Thapelo emphasises that the dignity of the poor can only be achieved if they are active participants in their own development, on their own terms and by their own design. Grounding the presentation in the slogan *Nothing about us, without us*, Thapelo speaks to the importance of grassroots democratic movements and their capacity for building self-determination and people's ability to think despite a condition of poverty.

Radio Ada

Radio Ada is a community radio station based in Ada, Ghana. Radio Ada's mission is to ensure that everyone in their community has access to relevant, quality information accessible in their native

Dangme. One of their central concerns, and the one that connects them to the Translocal Learning Network, is the privatization of the Songor Salt Lagoon, an ancestral resource of the Dangme and one of their main livelihoods. For decades, Radio Ada has been at the forefront of the movements in defense of the Songor, distributing key information and documents about the issue, forming solidarity networks with other journalistic organisations in West Africa, and sharing their stories and learnings in the Translocal Learning Network.

Additionally, Radio Ada has a lot of experience facing and resisting journalistic repression. The late Noah Dameh, the former Deputy Station Coordinator at the station, was harassed and persecuted for over two years by members of Electrochem Ltd. and the Ghana Police for denouncing grave human rights violations in Ada. This long and exhausting episode of his life ultimately resulted in his demise, turning him into a martyr and marking Radio Ada's work as an important legacy to the community.

Now, in the aftermath of Noah's death, Radio Ada has made a special effort to share the stories of community members who continue to be victims of violent attacks by the hands of the state. Written by Amanor Dzeagu, the Radio Ada chapter, Chapter 7, is titled "The struggle to keep a people's heart beating: the Songor and Radio Ada". While documenting several disturbing cases of violence and intimidation, Radio Ada reveals how corporate greed fuels state-led violence.

Chapters by student and academic members of the TLN

In addition to the chapters produced by social movements and social change organisations who are partners in the Translocal Learning Network, there are additional chapters shared in the pages that follow written by academics who work with various partners, as well as students who have been contributing to the network through research assistantships. These chapters help to deepen the story of the network by sharing reflections on translation in the network (moving between Spanish and English); what those doing a lot of

the unseen labour of our gatherings learned in their experience of this network; and some of the overlapping themes that an academic point of view sees in these stories and in this work.

Chapter 8: Translation, Care, and Political Commitment in the Translocal Learning Network

Wojciech Tokarz & Rodrigo Paradela

The chapter by Ro and Wojciech delves into the pivotal role of translation and cultural negotiation in facilitating exchanges between social movements across language barriers, enabling more inclusive and effective communication. It examines how participants employ foreignisation and domestication strategies to challenge colonial narratives and assert their unique perspectives. This approach aligns with the overarching structure of this book, where Spanish and English are presented side by side, reflecting the commitment to linguistic equity and cross-cultural dialogue.

Chapter 9: Learners in Practice: Research Assistant Learning from Social Movement Struggles

Sheena Cameron & Rodrigo Paradela

Sheena and Ro add another dimension of learning in their chapter, sharing their own learnings and reflections from their participation in this network as research assistants, in relation to the changing context and expressed learnings of other former research assistants over the last twelve years, while simultaneously engaged in their own studies – Ro as an undergraduate honours student, and Sheena as a PhD student.

Chapter 10: Learning from the movements

Anne Harley & Jonathan Langdon

As engaged scholars, with a long interest in social movements, Anne and Jon have been working with some of the social movements who form part of this group over a number of years. They have learned a great deal from their interaction with them, and have worked together to begin to theorise this learning. In this contribution, Anne and Jon discuss what is meant by the concept ‘sub-altern social movement’, and why they feel that the learning from such social movements is critical in current times.

Chapter 11: Conclusion – Translocal Learning Network

This chapter emerges from the collective reflections of the network on the process of creating the book, and what we have learned along the way. It will respond to the emergent themes and interlinkages identified in the opening chapter, but also highlight the ways in which we have all responded to each other's stories, comments and analyses.

Translocal Learning Network – a tree rooted in struggle, but spreading stories as fruit for change

To end this opening to the book, we want to share the origins and reasoning behind our choice of a tree as a cover for this book. The image of the tree metaphorically captures our work as a network. We have described how the roots are the various struggles we are in; the trunk is our mutual partnerships and collective relationships, the branches are our actions, in our own struggles and in solidarity with each other, and the fruit are the things we learn from our struggles and from each other that can manifest as stories to share, and spread this knowledge (Langdon, Cameron, Paradela & Baidoo, 2025).

CHAPTER 2

‘Players change but the game remains the same’: Current realities of the poor, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal

Zodwa Nsibande (Church Lands Programme)

Introduction

The dismantling of a brutal, undemocratic, and racially exclusive governance system in South Africa in 1994 stands as one of the most significant human achievements of the twentieth century. The dynamic nature of this political transition raises critical questions regarding the entrenched myths and narratives surrounding racial identities in the nation. In the aftermath of 1994, South Africa is frequently portrayed as a successful model of racial integration.

In the post-apartheid era, the South African state attempted to establish a consensus around liberalism, both economically and politically. However, the country’s democracy has been sustained by protest and social mobilizations, which are crucial for its survival. Overall, South Africa’s political transformation post-apartheid has been a complex and ongoing process, with the country striving to create a more ideal democracy and a new political culture (Khan & Booysen, 2024; Neocosmos, 2002).

Although the parliament has become more inclusive compared to the apartheid era, the African National Congress has leveraged its significant majority to weaken the legislature’s ability to hold the executive accountable, with party-list representatives often subordinated to the directives of party leadership.

The Persistence of Poverty and Inequality

The discourse surrounding income inequality and poverty in South Africa has predominantly been articulated through an economic lens. Nonetheless, it is evident that the political frameworks established post-apartheid have failed to ensure economic welfare and prosperity for the historically marginalised Black, Indian, and Coloured communities.

In the aftermath of apartheid, there has been notable economic advancement among the historically disadvantaged Black and Coloured populations in South Africa. However, the rise of trade unions and political freedoms has not corresponded with proportional increases in wages, which is widely recognised as a major barrier to national cohesion. Efforts to address these issues have included the implementation of minimum wage regulations and affirmative action policies, yet these measures have often sparked interracial tensions and heightened racial divisions, reminiscent of challenges faced by other formerly colonized societies. Even as job insecurity for Black workers grows and social cohesion weakens, people still need work, leading to a complicated dynamic between employers and employees. While inequality remains striking, the emergence of a Black elite and middle class complicates the racial landscape, and although intra-societal violence is alarmingly high, it is often confined within specific communities, reflecting the enduring spatial legacies of apartheid.

South Africa is characterised by a deeply religious populace, where faith continues to serve as a crucial mechanism for channeling public discontent away from political tensions. The fundamental principles governing societal interactions remain unchanged, suggesting that regardless of the individuals involved, the core objectives, strategies, and dynamics persist. This concept is applicable across various domains, including sports, politics, and life itself, highlighting that while participants may change, the underlying essence of the situation remains constant. Although the end of apartheid has led to a diminished focus on South Africa, the sociological repercussions of that era still demand attention from the current government. In KwaZulu-Natal, for instance, society has

had to adapt to the abnormality of load shedding, where certain areas experience electricity outages for several hours daily. This situation emerged after the ANC government, in power since 2007, committed to providing electricity access to the historically marginalised Black community. While the government has made strides in connecting households to the grid, it has inadvertently perpetuated privileges for the White population, as the infrastructure established during apartheid has not been sufficiently expanded to meet the needs of the growing population.

Currently, power stations are unable to meet the electricity demand, resulting in insufficient supply to maintain essential services. Since 2019, KwaZulu-Natal has faced severe flooding (exacerbated by global warming), leading to widespread homelessness, infrastructure damage, and even fatalities. Survivors have been relocated to “transit camps,” intended for temporary housing, highlighting the deterioration of the infrastructure established during the apartheid era. The post-1994 democratic government has focused on maintaining this outdated system rather than investing in future improvements. A well-maintained drainage system could have mitigated the adverse effects of heavy rainfall, allowing communities to benefit from the rain instead of fearing its consequences.



Members of Sekwanele (“enough”), a women’s group in Melmoth, KwaZulu-Natal

Nevertheless, hope persists, exemplified by Sekwanele (“Enough”), a women’s group in Melmoth, KwaZulu-Natal. Confronting patriarchal challenges, these women declared their need for involvement and representation in community issues. The lack of police presence in the area led to women being vulnerable as they were not consulted when crime incidents and decisions of punishment for the crime were done, although they as women were directly affected, either as parents or survivors. The village relied on traditional methods to resolve matters, making them vulnerable to abuse and other forms of violence. The Sekwanele Women’s Group was then formed to address this issue and advocate for a stronger police presence, which they did by making connections to the local police station and being given a direct person to contact should they seek their presence and to have a visible police presence in the village from time to time.



Sekwanele (“enough”), a women’s group
working on land to produce food

When the group realised that the initial issue might not be permanent, they shifted their focus to a sustainable activity like food production (agriculture), ensuring the longevity of their collective efforts. The Sekwanele Women’s Group has empowered and inspired women in the community to take charge of their lives and create positive change. The group’s collective approach to agriculture has strengthened bonds among members and promoted a sense of community.

The group’s success can inspire other women in the community to take action and create positive change.



Sekwanele women's group during their monthly meetings where reflections are made and decisions are taken

They initiated food production initiatives, successfully growing crops to sustain their families and selling surplus to neighboring villages, generating income to support their households. They also use the money they get from selling to contribute to a stokvel (savings club), in which they collectively manage their earnings, which proves beneficial at the end of each year. Family gatherings necessitate significant financial resources, and during these times they are also able to contribute to the burial society, which provides assistance in the event of a death. Previously, they depended on their male partners, who were employed in urban areas, for financial support. However, the onset of COVID-19 resulted in many individuals in unstable jobs losing their employment, forcing them to return to their homes.

The Sekwanele women successfully supported their families through the food they cultivated and the income generated from sales, even in the absence of formal employment. Their male partners recognised the significance of the women's contributions, understanding their desire for inclusion in decision-making processes, as the women asserted their value within the community. The way in which they have economically liberated themselves through their initiatives has marked a significant step towards their liberation.

The lesson learned from their food production and collective efforts has been documented in a book intended to inspire the younger generation in the village and serve as a lasting legacy. Additionally, they have shared insights on how the journey of Sekwanele has individually impacted each of them. Lessons learned include a) the importance of engagement with local communities to identify challenges and develop solutions that address their specific needs; b) the need to encourage collective action among community members to promote a sense of ownership and accountability; and c) the need to encourage groups to diversify their activities to ensure sustainability and longevity.

In the context of ongoing electricity load shedding, the rural communities of KwaZulu-Natal have drawn considerable attention from mining companies seeking to extract coal, a resource critical for electricity generation. Unfortunately, most of this coal is exported, leaving local communities vulnerable as mining operations disrupt their traditional livelihoods. While these corporations promise job opportunities and improved living conditions, such assurances often serve as a tactic to gain consent for land use. As communities become aware that these promises are unfulfilled and recognise the associated risks of mining, they begin to organise and raise awareness about the dangers faced by others who have previously succumbed to similar enticements. This situation has led to divisions within many communities.

Activists often face legal charges that lead them to court, diverting their attention from their cause and undermining community efforts. In some instances, this can result in fatal consequences for activists, discouraging others from continuing the fight. What I am highlighting here is how the legal system is being used as a means of control to silence and intimidate activists, and how this has severe consequences for activists trying to mobilise a community to join them as they fear to suffer the same fate as previous ones who were held at mental hostage by being dragged into a prolonged case which lasted two and half years, at the end of which they were acquitted on provision that they will never protest again.

In essence, the criminal justice system was being used by mining

companies as a tool to maintain their power structure, rather than being a true instrument of justice. This is a crucial observation, that when activists take action and stand up for what they believe in, the law enforcement is always on the side of the powerful (those in authority).

In KwaZulu-Natal, particularly in Durban, a significant water shortage has emerged, affecting one of South Africa's largest metropolitan areas. The deteriorating state of infrastructure has only recently caught the attention of politicians, who are beginning to recognise the potential for exploitation. This crisis has given rise to a syndicate called the 'water tanker mafia' that exploits the inadequate water supply to extort both residents and local governments. In KwaZulu-Natal, this mafia actively sabotages water systems to extend their contracts for supplying water tankers to communities in need. Alarming, these suppliers often source water from unsafe and non-potable sources, such as dams or rivers, as their profits are tied to the number of tankers delivered. This scenario is a stark example of how privatization and neoliberal ideologies have given rise to a new iteration of oppressive systems, where the pursuit of profit is prioritised over the well-being of marginalised communities.

As is clear, over the past three decades, South Africa has experienced six different administrations, yet the marginalised poor have not realised the promised "better life for all." As the nation prepares for the inauguration of its seventh administration following the general elections that took place on 29 May 2024, the results indicated that no single party had achieved a majority in the legislature. Consequently, South Africa entered into a multiparty government for the first time since Nelson Mandela's initial Government of National Unity when he became president. This shift appears to reflect a growing discontent among voters, as evidenced by the outcomes of both the 2021 local government elections and the 2024 national elections, signaling a desire for change from ANC leadership. The major political parties have demonstrated little willingness to collaborate effectively at the national level, largely due to ideological differences and a tendency among party

members to prioritise their own interests over those of the constituents they represent.

South Africans are keenly observing the coalitions formed among political parties. However, there is a growing concern regarding the effectiveness of power-sharing arrangements, particularly in municipalities where service delivery has faltered due to internal conflicts among coalition partners. While opposing parties may collaborate at the national level, their discord at the local government level jeopardises this relationship. The current government of national unity (GNU) is revealing elements of right-wing politics, prioritising those who can afford services while neglecting the less fortunate, leading to an increase in urban evictions.

Ordinary people are increasingly alarmed that the GNU and the Governments of Provincial Unity (GPUs) risk becoming governments of impunity rather than accountability, where parties shield each other from scrutiny under the guise of “stability” while corruption festers unchecked. In KwaZulu-Natal this fear is sharpened by bitter realities: millions meant for housing, water, and rural development in municipalities like uMzinyathi and uThukela have vanished while communities remain landless and without basic services, and corrupt land deals and fraudulent housing allocations continue to dispossess the poor. For rural farm dwellers and landless people fighting to reclaim dignity, these unity governments are seen not as a promise of change but as a pact of silence that buries accountability and protects elites, turning “unity” into a weapon against the very people it claims to serve. This has been evident as the electricity supplying body, Eskom, was changing/decoding the meter boxes. A lot of people from townships and rural areas were left with anxiety worrying that they might be cut off from the grid. The architect of the GNU did not anticipate the cracks. Cracks are the excessiveness of architectural frameworks. It's how walls spill away from designs.

Recently, the Durban long-distance taxi operators went on an eight-day strike, ceasing to transport the public due to their unhappiness with the failure of the government, particularly the Transport department, to address their grievances. This caused

chaos in communities that heavily rely on minibus taxis to move from one place to another. It became apparent that the government was slow to find common ground between the taxi owners and the department, perhaps because, at the end of the day, they don't use the taxis themselves. As the saying goes, 'when two bulls fight, it's the grass that suffers.' This was evident during this period.

Historical evidence suggests that genuine transformation does not stem from representative politics but rather from grassroots movements, often referred to as politics beyond the state. This raises critical questions about the aspirations of marginalised communities and where their hopes truly reside, suggesting that many may feel abandoned and believe they must rely on themselves rather than on elected leaders, as the underlying dynamics remain unchanged.

Conclusion

Again and again, movements have been tempted to place their hope in parties. The promise is always the same: *if we help them into office, they will help us into freedom*. But history tells us otherwise.

In South Africa, the Landless People's Movement once leaned toward the ANC, only to discover that promises of land reform dissolved into betrayal. Their rebirth came through refusal – “*No Land! No Vote!*” – a death to illusions so they could live in truth.

In Brazil, the MST walked beside the Workers' Party, not as servants but as critical comrades. They learned to cheer victories, but also to occupy land and resist when the state hesitated. Their survival was in never surrendering their autonomy, in knowing that power must remain with the people on the ground.

In Zimbabwe, war veterans gave their struggle over to ZANU-PF and became its weapon. Some gained, but the movement itself was captured, reduced to an instrument of elite survival. By aligning too tightly, they lost the breath of independence.

These stories teach us: when we attach ourselves too closely to parties, we risk dying the wrong kind of death – the death of our autonomy, the suffocation of our struggle. But when we are willing to let illusions die, we can live with clearer eyes. Our strength lies not in the ballot box, nor in the handshake with politicians, but in the living power of communities who refuse to be silenced.

The experiences of the poor in KwaZulu-Natal, from what I understand, is that despite changes in the government and electoral system, the fundamental issues affecting the poor remain unaddressed. The phrase “**players change, but the game remains the same**” suggests that electoral politics have limited impact on alleviating poverty and social exclusion.

This is a crucial realization, as it highlights that true change may not come from relying solely on electoral outcomes or government policies. Instead, the marginalised communities themselves hold the key to driving meaningful change through their collective power and agency from below.

This perspective emphasises the importance of community-led initiatives (such as Sekwanele), grassroots movements, and individual empowerment. It’s a call to action, encouraging individuals to take ownership of their circumstances and work together to create a more equitable society.

Responses to CLP’s chapter from other members of the Network

Savannah Research and Advocacy Network:

It is clear how the Black elites were or had been incorporated into the capitalist system. The Black incorporation into the capitalist system as allies has weakened the African National Congress (ANC) and led to the coalition government, and that might make it difficult for land reforms that could benefit the poor and marginalised. We have already witnessed the economic sanctions by the Trump administration in the United States of America (USA) on the land issue and how the USA regards the victims of land appropriation during apartheid the era as oppressors today

We have had a similar situation in Ghana, and more specifically in Talensi, in which court issues have led to activists giving up on the struggle for social justice, given the expenses involved in going through the court system. This has ensured that everything remains the same, as the title suggests. Sekwanele grassroots movements show practical ways that communities can support themselves through agricultural initiatives to improve low incomes.

The incorporation of Blacks into the governance structure, having them maintain the status quo, is what has happened in other African countries that did not experience apartheid. There is a need for grassroots organisations to engage in the political process by aligning themselves into progressive parties. Competing for political power will ultimately bring to the fore the struggle for social justice and economic emancipation.

The story is the same all over Africa. We have the same electricity problems, the same drainage problems. When it rains in Accra, it is a disaster and a no-go area for some people, and lives get lost.

It is the same story told all over again.

CCDA:

1. As long as communities continue to be governed by corrupt people who care nothing for social development, but only for their own personal interests, things will not change. Indigenous peoples of color must take control and gain more space to make decisions.
2. Sharing the progress and successes of some communities with others will contribute to strengthening the work of each community, as women have demonstrated.
3. Indigenous peoples must participate politically to achieve responsible and democratic power that will help Indigenous peoples emerge from underdevelopment.
4. As in many parts of the world, electoral policies must be updated to ensure they are equal for all political parties without benefiting the largest.
5. It is suggested that the active participation of women, who have demonstrated significant progress in agriculture and decision-making, be expanded to other regions. Women and children participating in whole-family farming has been found to be extremely beneficial in CCDA's experience.

Radio Ada:

Current realities of the poor, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal, share significant thematic similarities with the struggle of the Ada Songor community over the privatization of the Songor Lagoon. Both

situations highlight how state-aligned privatization, elite control, and systemic marginalization undermine the livelihoods and agency of local, historically disadvantaged communities. In Ada Songor, many traditional leaders have endorsed the lease of the lagoon to a big businessman, McDan, prioritising personal gain or political alignment over the will of the people. This has resulted in a fractured community, where leadership no longer represents collective interests but instead acts as a gatekeeper for external capital. In KwaZulu-Natal, although the focus is on political elites and corporate actors, it is also clear that local structures are colluding with systemic oppression especially where traditional or municipal actors allow mining companies or privatised services to exploit the people. In both cases, leadership structures are manipulated to suppress dissent and facilitate extraction, be it of coal or salt.

Radio Ada finds that the political elite continue to benefit post-apartheid South Africa while the poor remain locked in systemic poverty. The electoral system is described as one that “favors elites,” regardless of which political party is in power. Similarly, in Ada Songor, the lease of the lagoon to ElectroChem Ghana Limited, owned by Dr. Daniel McKorley (McDan), a politically connected businessman, represents elite capture of communal resources, without involving the Indigenous salt producers who have historically depended on the lagoon for their survival. Both communities face economic displacement. In KwaZulu Natal, rural dwellers suffer as mining corporations encroach on land, while in Ada, traditional salt-winning communities are subject to illegality by industrial monopolization of salt production. The struggles are rooted in a neoliberal model of development that prioritises profit and outside investment over community welfare and sustainable livelihoods.

The CLP also discusses how activists are criminalised and legally harassed in KwaZulu-Natal to silence dissent by using lawsuits, prolonged court cases and others. In Ada, community members protesting the privatization of the lagoon have similarly faced militarised policing, arrests, detentions and several intimidation strategies, reflecting the same weaponization of state power to

suppress grassroots resistance. KwaZulu-Natal experiences inadequate services like drainage, electricity, and water, outcomes of neglect by authorities. Ada similarly suffers from state neglect of basic services, yet paradoxically, the same state supports resource extraction projects that benefit private investors.

Community-Led Solutions

The Sekwanele women's group has undertaken commendable initiatives, such as self-sustaining agricultural projects, aimed at enhancing autonomy and resilience within their communities. In Ada, both women and youth from salt-producing areas have come together through cooperatives and advocacy platforms, although it is noted that these initiatives often encounter limited institutional support. Yihi-Katseme is recognised as the prominent women's group within the Songor communities, advocating for the communal use of the Songor resources rather than allowing for individual monopolization. In light of current leasing challenges and resistance, the communities have established the Ada Songor Lagoon Association (ASLA) as a platform for solidarity and collective action.

Lessons

- True transformation demands “politics beyond the state” – grassroots mobilization and community agency, rather than waiting for top-down reforms.
- Privatization, masked as development, often leads to monopoly control and livelihood erosion, not progress. In both KwaZulu-Natal and Ada, this model is extractive, not inclusive.
- Communities must scrutinise development promises and demand participatory, not exploitative, governance of natural resources.
- The resilience and success of the Sekwanele group is a blueprint for Ada Songor communities: building internal solidarity, diverse income strategies, and alternative economies.
- Empowering local women and youth through collective agency can transform resistance into sustainable livelihood strategies.

Conclusion

The parallel between the South African and Ada Songor contexts reveals a common postcolonial pattern: systemic exclusion persists under new actors, masked by democratic rhetoric. Both communities confront a crisis of representation, where political and economic systems fail to reflect or respond to their needs. Yet, from these shared struggles emerge powerful lessons in resistance, solidarity, and innovation. The key takeaway is community empowerment rooted in local knowledge, unity, and collective action offers the most enduring path to justice and autonomy in the face of elite-driven development agendas.

Things we think others could learn from this chapter and our reflections on it

1. A change in the ruling party does not necessarily change the underlying ‘logic’ of the state, which favours elites. So we need ‘politics beyond the state.’ Rather than allying themselves with a party, movements need to remain independent, or at least ‘critical comrades’, although some of us remain more hopeful about the possibility of electoral politics to bring about real change.
2. ‘Development’ is more often extractive than inclusive, especially when it involves the privatisation of resources or development, or partnerships between business and government.
3. The legal/judicial system frequently diverts struggles or is used to silence/control them.
4. Responses to immediate concerns can lead to longer-term organisation around broader issues. This is more likely to happen if those affected are able to identify challenges and develop solutions that address their specific needs, if collective action promotes ownership and accountability of all involved, and if groups work to ensure sustainability and longevity through, for example, diversifying their activities.
5. Involving women and youth in struggles from the inception is essential. Young people and women are at the forefront of the struggle; when you give them space, it deepens the learning of the rest of the struggle. They need to be listened to because when we keep doing the same thing, we can’t expect a different result.

CHAPTER 3

The Talensi-Nabdam Gold Rush: Local Complicity, Resource Exploitation, and the Crisis of Dignity

Coleman Agyeyomah & Alhassan Shani,
Venceremos Development Consult
Photos by Coleman Agyeyomah

Introduction

Behind the glittering promise of Ghana's mineral wealth lies a tragic story of how the soul and dignity of a people have been desecrated by foreign exploitation and corporate greed, state collusion and complicity, and corporate impunity. What started as a dawn of prosperity through the discovery of gold resources has for many become an albatross of environmental degradation, social division and a loss of cultural identity for the people of Talensi and Nabdam in the Upper East Region of Ghana. However, this story is not only about foreign exploitation and corporate greed; it is equally a story of local complicity and the self-inflicted wounds resulting from greed, mistrust, and short-sightedness.

The gold rush that swept through the Talensi and Nabdam districts, beginning in the late 1980s-early 1990s, was initially seen as an opportunity for community empowerment and transformation. Yet, over time, the very actors who sought resource ownership through mining became the architects of their own dispossession.

This chapter examines how local small-scale miners, driven by personal ambition and the allure of quick wealth, opened the doors to foreign exploitation. Their inability to cooperate, regulate themselves and protect communal interests created fertile ground for what later became a devastating saga of resource plunder and moral decay.

The Promise of Gold and the Opening of Pandora's Box

The Upper East Region of Ghana holds vast gold reserves, particularly in districts such as Talensi, Nabdham, Bolgatanga, and Bawku West. For many years, the people in these districts depended on subsistence farming and petty trade. The gold discovery, first explored by Russian Soviet companies in Ghana's First Republic but then not developed until the late 1980s/early



Gbane Community, Upper East Region of Ghana



A young man using traditional technology to process gold
at the Gbane Community

1990s by Ghanaian small-scale miners, offered hope for a chance for youth employment, local revenue, and modernization.

However, the rush for gold soon became a scramble for personal gains. The small-scale miners competed for control of concessions. Their lack of coordination and disregard for environmental and safety standards attracted the attention, and later intrusion, of foreign investors who promised these Ghanaian small-scale miners new technology and capital to aid in their mining exploration and operations.

In 2008, a director of the Yenyeya Mining Group (YMG) with a small-scale concession was part of a delegation to China to study underground mining. What was intended as a capacity-building initiative instead became a gateway for foreign penetration into Ghana's Upper East Region's goldfields. Upon returning, the director of YMG entered a partnership with Shaanxi Mining Company Limited, a Chinese firm, to provide technical support for small-scale mining operations initially focused on the Yenyeya concession, but later also expanded the partnership to include "Pubortaaba" Mining Group (another small-scale concession). Both mining groups had legal small-scale concessions, covering slightly less than the official 25 acres small scale operations were allowed. According to *Ghana's Minerals and Mining Act* (703), it is only domestic operators that can legally own such small-scale concessions. Indeed, this partnership marked the beginning of a relationship that would redefine the mining landscape in Talensi – a relationship born not of necessity, but of misplaced trust and unregulated ambition.

The Rise of Earl International Mining Group (Shaanxi) and the Fall of Local Control

When the Shaanxi mining company arrived in 2008 as a technical support provider to Yenyeya and then Pubortaaba Mining Groups, it did so at the invitation of these local miners themselves. This technical support was supposed to enable these small-scale entities to set up modern mining practices that would help increase their production. The partnership was voluntary, negotiated by the Ghanaian small-scale miners, who sought capital and expertise

but failed to safeguard their long-term interests, as the “technical support” quickly revealed itself to be a way for foreign capital to insert itself into the small-scale domain that was supposed to be reserved for Ghanaians only.



Shaanxi Mining Company's living quarters and offices
for the Chinese workers at Gbane

By 2017, Shaanxi had grown stronger by using its superior organisation and financial capacity to renegotiate terms with both small-scale operations. The local small-scale miners, divided between those with a relationship with Shaanxi and those outside this relationship, failed to form a united front to resist this incursion. The consequence was that after the area was deblocked for large scale mining activity, Shaanxi transitioned into a large-scale mining operation in 2018 and subsequently rebranded itself as Earl International Group (Ghana) Gold Limited, with a 16.02 km² concession acquired as a result of the Government of Ghana's deblocking policy – a policy that made it possible for foreign companies like Cardinal Namdini to acquire mining leases and concessions in this area that had been reserved for small-scale, Ghanaian-owned operations. This mining lease effectively displaced its former Ghanaian partners, Yenyeya and Pubortaaba. So, in effect, it was not just Shaanxi, a foreign firm, that betrayed local interests but a betrayal from within. By inviting Shaanxi into the Upper East mining scene,

Yenyeya and Pubortaaba effectively let them gain a foothold in the area. Furthermore, local bureaucrats and politicians also betrayed small scale operators by collaborating with Shaanxi to undermine the domestic focus of this mining area. Ultimately, the local small-scale miners prioritised personal advantage over collective strategy, competing for influence and government recognition. The lack of a common vision among Indigenous miners eroded their bargaining power and left them vulnerable to manipulation.

Greed, Rivalry and the Tragedy of Talensi & Nabdam

In January 2019, an explosion at Shaanxi's site killed 16 Ghanaian miners, most of whom were unauthorised miners (galamseyers) operating dangerously close to the Chinese company's shafts. The incident was rightly blamed on corporate negligence of blasting without warning, but beneath the surface lay another truth, which was that the reckless and illegal tunneling by local miners had compromised their safety.

Instead of learning from the disaster, rivalry deepened. Some miners sided with the foreign mining companies (another foreign mining company, Cardinal mines, had also begun operating in the area) for short-term benefits, while others joined protests that sometimes resulted in violence, as they sought to reclaim lands



Shaanxi's mining shaft located in a school at Gbane



Blasting from Shaanxi damages school's washrooms

which had already been leased to large-scale firms. In the process, the social fabric of the Talensi and Nabdam communities was compromised; brother turned against brother, and community cohesion that had largely predated the emergence of mining in the area gave way to fragmented interests and distrust. When officials of Shaanxi were caught in 2021 allegedly attempting to smuggle 21 bars of gold out of the country, outrage engulfed the nation. Yet few questioned how such volumes of gold could have been extracted unnoticed without collaboration from other local players. From engaging in illicit gold sales to political lobbying, segments of the local mining elite – such as prominent local concession owners and those heading up local branches of state institutions – became active participants in the exploitation of communities.

The Courtroom Drama and the Illusion of Victory

Years of legal battles between Shaanxi/Earl and Yenyeya came about because of Shaanxi subsuming Yenyeya's concession into its large-scale mining license. In 2024 the Court of Appeal finally decided in favor of Yenyeya, allowing it to sue Earl for taking over its concession. This was hailed locally as a victory for justice (Media Without Borders, 2025). For the most part, this victory was symbolic – it did not undo Earl's large-scale concession, nor re-grant Yenyeya's

concession, it merely gives Yenyeya a route to seek damages. But a court ruling could not undo the damage to the environment, the rifts in the community, and the lost lives and livelihoods.

The foreign companies have been far from blameless. However, the failure of local political, bureaucratic and even small-scale mining leadership from the start, which sacrificed community interest for personal fame and fortune, was the true tragedy. Exploitation was made possible by the transformation of what might have been a group effort to promote sustainable small-scale mining into a competition for individual wealth.

When Gold Becomes a Curse

The gold rush spreading through Talensi and Nabdam symbolises Ghana's broader struggle with artisanal mining governance. Instead of forming cooperatives and demanding accountability, some local small-scale artisanal miners operate outside regulatory frameworks, often aided by local chiefs, bureaucrats and politicians who seek a share of the loot. Their actions undermine state authority, weaken environmental oversight and open a space for foreign dominance.

Today, large-scale mining companies like Cardinal Namdini Mining Limited, Cassius Mining Limited, and Earl International Group Ghana Gold Limited dominate the Upper East mining sector. Their exploitative behaviors have had damaging impacts on local communities and the environment, which the SRAN chapter that follows documents. But their dominance was made possible not solely by foreign ambition but by domestic disorder. In essence, the resource plunder of Talensi and Nabdam was not imposed, it was enabled.

Conclusion: The Betrayal Within

The Talensi–Nabdam gold rush story is a tale of local self-betrayal rather than only foreign exploitation. The very policy to promote Ghanaian ownership of small-scale concessions that local small-scale miners aimed to protect was jeopardised in their pursuit of wealth and power, as some of them snuck outsiders in through a side door. They failed to defend their people, their land, or their

honour. Instead of being stolen, Talensi's soul was sold to outsiders for a low price to gain entry, and then by politicians. The lesson is obvious: without local cooperation, no amount of foreign exploitation can be successful.

The cycle of betrayal and resource looting will go on until there is an honest political leadership coupled with a will by Ghana's small-scale miners to learn to organise, regulate, and put the good



Bismark Zuma of TAMCI explaining community action on mining concerns/issues



Backstopping support and solidarity from international partners

of the group ahead of their own interests. This – notwithstanding the recent social mobilization of citizens/communities, capacity building and backstopping support by Innovations Development Alternatives for SRAN and her local network partners; Talensi Communities Mining Initiatives (TAMCI), Nabdam Youth for Development (NY4D), and Bolgatanga – Sirigu Development Association Network (BoSDAN) cannot be overemphasised. This effort propelled SRAN and the network partners to engage with local communities impacted by mining throughout Ghana's Upper East Region to build and empower local mining watch committees to ensure the transition to large-scale mining does not happen without the people being proactive in monitoring what happens, including acting to safeguarding their environment and other mining-related abuses. Furthermore, the very right of the concessions of these operations in the first place is being contested through the work of Tindanas – the traditional custodians of the land – and their association. This suggests some learning from the greed and selfishness of the past.

Chapter Glossary

Grune: Refers to an ethnic language in the Upper East Region

Nabdam: Refers to an ethnic group/dialect. Additionally, it is a district in the Upper East Region

Yenyeya: Refers a name of a person/Object in the local Taleni dialect

Pubortaaba: Refers to a name of a person/Object in the local Taleni dialect

Talensi: Refers to an ethnic group and a district in the Upper East Region

Tindana (Tinga Dana): Refers to a landowner in Grune

Tindan (Ting Dan): Refers to a landowner in Taleni/Nabdam dialects

Responses to Venceremos' chapter from other members of the Network

CCDA:

Indigenous peoples' own development model is an alternative to the extractive model the chapter shows people are currently experiencing. This extractive model impacts on human rights.

Abahlali:

I think the story resonates very much with what is happening in South Africa in the way that multinational companies take over resources in places where small-scale miners and artisans were surviving before multinationals arrived. And once the multinationals are in place, they exploit the very people who lived through these resources, who survived through these resources. So it was a very fascinating story that does resonate with what is happening in South Africa now.

But this happened in 2008 in Ghana, that's where it began. In South Africa we have a history of the taking over by multinational companies from small-scale miners who had been subsisting through their mining practices. And they use the people who had been living through these resources in harmony and trying to survive.

And then people are exploited by these companies in the name of development, in the name of improving the lives of the people, exploiting resources on a large scale. And that divides the community; it was better when we were small-scale miners, some would say, but when multinational companies come with machinery, it makes the machinery the reason we are able to mine on a large scale.

So there is division and fighting, strife that happens in the community as a result of people coming from outside to claim the resources of the people who live there. So, when I read the story, it resonated with the current situation in South Africa.

**Things we think others could learn from this chapter
and our reflections on it**

- The dominant model of development is an extractive one – it takes wealth out of the land and the community. This is obviously especially true of large-scale mining.
- There have always been miners, but local, small-scale miners did not (and were not able to) extract at a scale that causes harm to the land and people.
- Large-scale mining companies, on the other hand, do cause harm to the land and its people, including local communities. However, we need to remember that some local people and politicians help them to do that.
- It is therefore very important to organise locally, and focus on communal rather than individual interests.

CHAPTER 4

Gold Slavery in Talensi

Edward Adeti & Yen Nyeya,
Savannah Research and Advocacy Network
Photos by Edward Adeti

Before the sun set in the middle of January 2019, at Gban, a deprived village in the Ghanaian district of Talensi, some angry locals gathered at a gold-mining site to stage a protest they had been planning.

The protest was for one purpose: to reiterate a long-standing call on the government of Ghana to eject Shaanxi Mining (Ghana) Limited, a subsidiary of the China Gold Resources Group Company Limited, from their land.

Since the Chinese company set foot in the district in 2008 to offer technical support services to two local small-scale mining firms named Yenyeya Mining Group and Pubortaaba Mining Enterprise, several Indigenous people had lost their lives in preventable mining accidents and through what the locals of the village described as deliberate killings in the company's mine.

The survivors and families of the victims of the accidents and "deliberate killings" were offered little or no compensation by the perpetrator (Shaanxi Mining Ghana Limited). And scarcely did the foreign company, which enjoyed a lot of support from some top government appointees and local traditional authorities, face any sanctions from the government for the human rights abuses it committed.

"They are killing our people, they are stealing our gold and, with the support of the selfish leaders we have, they are going to leave our land divided and more deprived than they met it when they arrived," Bismarck Zumah, a well-known human rights activist in the area, told the press in front of a crowd holding protest placards in the air.

The following day, the nation learned about the protest through the media. But as was usual, the call yielded no result.

Around the midnight of Wednesday, 23 January 2019, a massive explosion, for which Shaanxi would be held responsible later, rocked the village. A number of Ghanaians, most of whom were natives of the district, were trapped underground in the sudden blast. They were not Shaanxi employees. They were miners employed by some small-scale mining groups that were rivals to Shaanxi's two local hosts, Yenyea and Pubortaaba.

The young men were frothing at the mouth as local rescuers carried them on their backs out of the smoke-engulfed tunnel. The rescuers transported them as fast as they could on motorbikes and an old pickup to the Upper East Regional Hospital, about an hour drive from the village. At least 16 of the men died. Those who survived were treated and discharged from that hospital.

It was the worst tragedy the entire district had ever seen in the history of mining. The disaster dominated front-page headlines for days. Responding to the resultant public outcry, the government temporarily shut down the company's operations and tasked the Minerals Commission to investigate the circumstances that led to the disaster.

The commission found Shaanxi culpable and fined the company \$50,000. The money was not meant for the families of the victims. It was meant for the government. The victims' families were not compensated.

The commission's report was met with condemnation by the locals who considered the fine not punitive enough. They had expected the perpetrators to face criminal prosecution – and go to jail – for what they described as a premeditated and coldblooded massacre. And they had also expected the company's operations to be permanently closed down.

On 14 March 2019, thousands of people poured into the streets of the district capital, Tongu, in demand for an immediate revocation of the company's licence, its permanent shutdown and the evacuation of the company's Chinese nationals from the area.

The company showed no remorse for the killings.

Despite the series of protests and demonstrations the Indigenous people waged against Shaanxi, the government granted a new licence to the company to run a large-scale mining business in the district under a new name – Earl International Group (Ghana) Gold Limited.

And despite a persistent chorus of disapproval from human rights activists and the general public against the company's lack of safe work practice, mining accidents have continued to happen on its premises without cease to this day.

Livelihood loss

At present, many families whose relatives died or suffered injuries through the company's activities and operations are clamouring for justice and for compensation. Some of them have taken the company to court but are frustrated because the lawyers who initially agreed to represent them suddenly pulled out of the cases.

The bereaved families strongly suspect that the lawyers have been paid by the wealthy company through its allies to be silent.

The losses the community has suffered for the past 17 years are not limited to human life. A number of households in the community also have lost their sources of income through the company's activities.

Before the company arrived in the district, the natives had survived through farming and gathering fruit from the economically valuable trees found in abundance in the area. They made money by selling that fruit through local middlemen to shea-processing factories located outside the district.

Those economic trees, comprising shea, baobab, acacia and locust bean among others, gave the district not only a thick vegetative cover but also a beautiful look.

Even after gold was discovered in the area and gold mining became another means of livelihood in the village, farming and fruit gathering remained the core sources of employment for many.

Countless economic trees were felled when the company arrived so it could take space to construct structures, store its mining equipment, install machines and operate.

Several women and men who had depended on these trees for

their livelihood were not compensated after the company felled the trees.

“We were picking shea nuts for commercial processing and using the income to take care of our children in school. But the shea trees have been destroyed and we no longer get the little income we were getting. Some of our girls have dropped out of school at the basic level and have gone into early marriage because we don’t have money to further our children’s education,” a woman named Nagbemah Dome complained to the press in 2022.

A worried mother of four children, Kutiiba Belimyin, said: “Even getting food is hard for us. We used to pick and process the shea nut so we could take care of our children. The company came and destroyed everything. That is why we are struggling here.”

Baanzen Baamah grieved similarly, saying the company “destroyed our shea trees from the roots with bulldozers” and “we don’t have any work to do because we can’t get the shea fruits any more.”

One of the elderly men in the village, Akoka Pahlaad, told journalists the company demolished a graveyard while clearing it for space.

“The Shaanxi operations here have not come to help the community at all. When they brought their big machines here to dig, I told them the area where they wanted to do the digging was our graveyard, where our great-grandparents were resting.

“I told them not to go there. They did not care. They still went ahead, did their digging and did some demarcations there. Later, they left with their machines. I remember, they only came to greet us and gave us one hundred Ghana cedis,” he said.

Concession takeover and pit closure

The land the Chinese company acquired for its large-scale mining business is about 16.02 km² in size, almost equal to 4,000 football fields combined.

Some small-scale miners were working legally on some portions of that swathe of land long before the company acquired it. Some of the small-scale miners declined to give up their bona fide concessions for the company, but they surrendered the concessions

after some officials of the previous government came with military support and threatened to evict them from their properties.

The company offered \$1 million to be shared among the concessionaires in compensation for the annexing of their goldfields. It also proposed to allocate 2% of its profits every 6 months to them as a group. But some of the small-scale miners, who said there was no proper negotiation before the takeover, complained that the money was not worth the concessions forcibly taken from them. Two among those small-scale mining firms –Yenyeya Mining Group and Nalamtaaba Mining Enterprise – are currently in court with the company in the region’s capital, Bolgatanga, in relation to the concession takeover.

The previous government twice deployed soldiers – in September 2022 and March 2024 – to kick people out of their homes in the district and close mining pits owned by licensed small-scale miners to make way for the operations of the Chinese company.

Those actions affected thousands of women. The women in question were not mine-workers. They were petty traders who were earning a living for themselves and their families by selling items including food, soap, bread, flashlight batteries, toothpaste and other minor products to the mine workers. They lost their petty trades after the government aided the company to seal off the local mining pits.

On Friday 15 March 2024, a decision by the government to seal off another set of mining pits in the area in the interest of the Chinese company led to some natives of Talensi being shot dead and wounded by state security officers.

A third-year student of Ghana’s University of Cape Coast (UCC), Bright Mbadiatong, was among the natives shot dead at the mining site. The slain student was not a miner. He had only returned home and was with his mother (a petty trader at the site) when one of the live bullets fired at a protesting crowd by the state security personnel hit and killed him. The tragedy is reminiscent of the death of Margaret Kowunor, a pregnant salt winner who was killed by a police bullet in 1985 during a similar struggle in a salt-mining town of Ada in Ghana’s capital, Accra.

When the company's tailings dams (a reservoir holding toxic wastewater generated from mining activities) reportedly leaked some time ago, the chemicals found their way into some sources of water from which some livestock, being reared by families in the area for commercial purposes, drank. The families suffered economic losses as the animals reportedly died from the contaminated water.

It was reported that the same toxic wastewater killed some economic trees and wiped out the grasses which were used by the locals in producing baskets and mats in commercial quantities in the community.

A tale of two displaced communities

Earl International Group (Ghana) Gold Limited is not the only foreign mining company found in the district.

Also present in the area is another giant Chinese-owned company named Cardinal Namdini Mining Limited. A subsidiary of Shandong Gold Mining Company Limited, Cardinal occupies 19.54 km² of the district and is similarly said to have indiscriminately felled many economic trees in pursuit of space for its large-scale mining operations.

The company is said to be the largest single-stream gold mine in West Africa, with a 15-year mining lease. It hopes to dig out 150 million tonnes of ore and produce 5 million ounces of gold during the 15-year period.

When Cardinal secured its gold-mining concession, two settlements in the district, Biung and a mining site called Accra (unofficially named after Ghana's capital) whose inhabitants were engaged in small-scale mining and farming activities, were affected. The two communities were resettled from their old places in order to give way for Cardinal's mining activities.

The *Ghana Mining Compensation and Resettlement Legislative Instrument 2175-2012* makes it clear that:

Subject to the act where the holder of the mining lease involves the displacement of inhabitants, the inhabitants shall be settled by the holder on suitable alternative land

and the resettlement shall have regard to the economic well-being and socio-cultural value of the persons to be resettled, with the objective to improve the livelihoods and standards of living of those persons.

The company claims to be investing \$600 million in the construction of resettlements and provision of 328 permanent camps for its staff.

On Friday 5 August 2022, Ghana’s Minister for Lands and Natural Resources at the time, Samuel Abu Jinapor, commissioned the new settlements named New Biung and New Accra. The minister described the project as “first-class resettlement” and urged the media to visit the area and see the “good work” Cardinal had done for the people.

He made the remarks despite the fact that the Chief of Biung had complained at the same commissioning ceremony that the resettlement project was poorly done.

Findings by advocacy group confirm chief’s concerns

A team from the Savannah Research and Advocacy Network (SRAN) had visited the two new settlements just a day before the commissioning ceremony was held. The team noticed during that visit that the project left a lot to be desired.



Resettlement homes in New Biung and New Accra
in Upper East Region, Talensi District



Resettlement homes in New Biung and New Accra
in Upper East Region, Talensi District

The structures were built with cement blocks, unlike the mud houses where the people lived before the resettlement, and both Cardinal and the government created a misleading impression that the people's lives had been improved.

There is no doubt that Cardinal has struck a rich mine and is going to make billions in 15 years and, therefore, what should have been provided to the people should have been better than what the SRAN team observed.

A closer look at the dwellings and comments coming from the 117 resettled families show that the new location is a far cry from what the minister described as a first-class resettlement. There were a number of issues that had not been taken into account in the construction of the properties and design of the resettlements.

The buildings are clustered together with no space for future expansion. In the northern socio-cultural setup, spaces usually are provided for children to put up their own houses near their parents' homes when they grow up. The resettled families had such spaces where they used to be. Cardinal did not provide that.

Moreover, the rooms are too small and the structures have no



A toilet built for the resettlement

decent compounds (fenced or walled-in area containing a building) and verandas. The compounds were poorly constructed and are already showing signs of deterioration from an insufficient amount of cement used. Provisions also were not made for the kitchen and the toilets were dingy little holes.

The place was built without taking into account the pattern of rainfall and how it could affect the dwellings. When it rains, the place becomes flooded and the inhabitants have to continually sweep away the water. The majority of the boreholes provided by the company for the resettled families do not provide water as expected. The inhabitants spend hours at boreholes trying to fill their water containers.

Worst of all is the lack of a proper access road to the two new settlements. The road to the new communities is nothing more than a path cleared by a bulldozer, left muddy and rough.

The company claims to have spent \$7 million in executing the resettlement project and constructing a 25-km road from Balungu, a community in the district, to the site, according to media reports.



Sinkholes created by mining companies
as a result of construction of a road to the mines

Worsening conditions

The SRAN team produced a report on its findings in the hope that the company and the relevant state institutions would act. When the SRAN team returned to the two communities on Wednesday, 17 July 2024 – nearly two years later – it did not see any improvement in the lives of the people.

The sinkholes the company dug in search for stones to construct the 25-km road for the transportation of equipment and gold were still left open as they were two years back.

The buildings in the two new settlements looked dilapidated. The paints were of inferior quality and were peeling off. The paths created within the structures were muddy. Most families who had no kitchen had turned their yards into kitchens.

The toilets, which are manholes, had been either abandoned or turned into storerooms. The people rather answer the call of nature in the bush. Many of the doors and windows were weak and some broken. Although some of the inhabitants have made adjustments to their properties, when it rains their new homes get flooded.

Many unemployed young people were sitting outside, playing a local board game called *oware* to while away the day. There was gloom on many faces.

“It seems they brought us here to die. There are no jobs. Those that get jobs work for a few weeks and are laid off. We have nothing to do. We cannot do what we used to do,” one of the inhabitants told the team.

Another one stated: “I go back to the old place to farm. This new place needs fertilizers for the land to yield crops, and since I do not have money to buy fertilizers, I go back to my old farm in Biung.”

A woman complained to the team during the visit that the company had fenced off the area where the locals had been picking shea nuts to sell. The visit coincided with a tour of the communities by officials of the Northern Electricity Distribution Company (NEDCo) urging the inhabitants to pay their electricity bills to avoid disconnection.

The inhabitants said they could not pay the bills because the resettlement had distanced them from the sources of income they used to have in their old places. Some of them were owing electricity bills ranging between Gh¢14,000 and Gh¢20,000. Only a few were able to pay their bills. Some of the boreholes were mechanised, making things more difficult for the homes that could not pay their electricity bills to get water.

An elderly man, who lost his livelihood through Shaanxi’s operation, said his family would have managed to cope with the loss if at least one of his jobless children had been employed and earning a living to take care of the family.

“As an aged person, I wouldn’t be bothered if I don’t have a job. If any of my children is employed, at least, that child would bring something home for us,” he stated during the team’s visit to the two new communities.

Slavery in disguise of job opportunities

Whenever the foreign mining companies come under public criticism for human rights abuse concerns, they fight back with claims that they have created jobs for the locals.

But the locals have consistently complained that they are not safe at work and that they do the same job as their Chinese counterparts but are paid less.

On Wednesday 13 March 2024, a clash erupted between some Ghanaian employees of Cardinal and the authorities of the company in connection with what the workers described as terrible working conditions. Honjoe Ventures, a Chinese-owned company and alleged shareholder of Cardinal, was engaged in July 2023, to construct a goldmine in Talensi for Cardinal.

According to the protesting workers, the management of Honjoe Ventures was paying Ghanaian skilled workers a daily wage of Gh¢80 (an equivalent of \$5.37 in 2025) each and Gh¢10 (\$0.67) for food per day. Unskilled Ghanaian workers, they said, received a wage of Gh¢70 (\$4.70) per day, but their Chinese counterparts were paid Gh¢950 (\$63.76) each per day for the same labour and they received a “cigarette smoking allowance” of Gh¢80 (\$5.37) a day.

One of the employees said the company’s yard was “worse than a slave camp” for the Indigenous artisans.

“We work seven days a week. We have no off days and we rest for only one hour thirty minutes. If you complain, they sack you.

“If you demand an increment of salary, they will sack you. If you ask for personal protective equipment, you are sacked. If you absent yourself for one day, the next day they will sack you,” he told journalists after the clash.

Another worker lamented: “Three people are forced to carry a heavy iron rod six people are supposed to carry. And when you are thirsty, they give you only hot water to drink in this hot weather.”

The company declined to comment when the media contacted its management for answers to the concerns raised by the workers.

A number of tragedies had happened the previous year inside the yard of Earl International Group (Ghana) Gold Limited. On Wednesday 17 May 2023, Godfred Nabil Nongbezina, an Earl employee, lost his arm on duty to a machine in the company’s yard. His family said the company abandoned him after paying his initial hospital bills. The company declined to comment when contacted by the press concerning the family’s allegations.

On Monday 10 July 2023, Earl's electrician, Victor Abisiyine Ayine, went missing while on duty inside the company's yard. His body was pulled out of a pool of the mining company's wastewater the following day after his younger brother, Jonathan, and some other relatives, who had sat through a sleepless night because he had not returned home the previous day, appeared at the company's site and demanded to know where he was.

As was usual, the company did not comment on the matter when the press pressed for answers. It took pressure from SRAN and the family's lawyer to secure a compensation package from the company for Ayine's family.

On Friday 17 November 2023, Earl's blast-man, Eric Frimpong, suffered a fatal accident while on duty. According to the company's public relations officer, Albert Azongo, the blast-man had finished an assignment underground and was returning when a wedge (a loose rock) suddenly came down on him.

The following month, another Earl mineworker called Kwesi Boalbil slumped suddenly to the ground while working at a gold-processing plant, and died. His employers claimed he suffered uncontrolled hypertension and revealed in a media interview that "we have a lot of other staff here who have high blood pressure."

An official bus carrying 22 Cardinal local workers to its site flipped over twice in the early hours of Saturday 7 September 2024 in the district.

"Another three had skeletal fractures and were referred to Ultima Platz Hospital in Zuarungu," the doctor at the Upper East Regional Hospital, Samuel Aborah, told the press a day after the crash.

While the 22 victims were on admission at that hospital, their colleagues staged a demonstration in Talensi against the company's authorities.

The demonstrators said the crash was the fourth to have happened in a row to workers while travelling on the company's buses to the mining site. The demonstration was to pressure their employers to prioritize the safety of Indigenous workers while at work.

Is justice within reach?

The presence and operations of foreign companies in the district have not profited the Indigenous people beyond the unsafe jobs that were created and the cheap or suspicious gifts offered in the name of corporate social responsibility.

In 2011, Shaanxi constructed a bridge over River Ohwn, claiming it was a gesture of its corporate social responsibility to the district. But the people dubbed it “corporate social robbery” with an explanation that the Chinese constructed the bridge primarily to aid its gold exploration movements across the district.

In 2023, the company constructed a classroom block in the area and raved about it as a corporate social responsibility project. Some natives of the area rejected that claim, saying the new classroom block was only a replacement of an old classroom block the company destroyed in the past through its operations.

In 2024, Cardinal donated about 14,000 exercise books to schoolchildren in 6 communities in the district. News of the donation drew criticism from the public. One of the people who slated the gift was a former Ghana ambassador to Italy and Minister of the Upper East region, Tangoba Abayage.

“There are some things that must not find their way into the news and this is one of them. A whole company exploiting huge gold deposits for export? And they brought both traditional and administrative leadership to a function to donate just about 14,000 exercise books: total cost of which may not even be up to 50k cedis? And they called the press to cover? I feel embarrassed.

I’m being very diplomatic with my choice of words here,” she posted on her Facebook timeline after the donation.

The companies are making massive profits while the district and its people, particularly those who lost their means of livelihood, remain thoroughly deprived.

There are only three tarred roads in the entire district today. Many of the public schools do not have furniture; the schoolchildren sit on the floor, or lie on their bellies when they are tired of sitting on the floor, to learn and write. A number of culverts have been broken by the heavy vehicles being used by the foreign

mining companies and their repair appears to be the least of the companies' concerns.

Earl International Group (Ghana) Gold Limited alone produces about 90% of the gold in the Upper East region, according to the Minerals Commission. The two foreign companies have on their side a group of media practitioners, traditional authorities, natives of the area and officials of state institutions who do their bidding for selfish gains and do not show any concern about the human rights transgressions being perpetrated by the companies. This group has been waging a battle on behalf of the two companies against individuals and organizations that advocate for protection, justice and fairness on behalf of the mining communities.

There are fears that if the locals' cry for justice and fairness continues to fall on deaf ears, they might seek justice and fairness their own way when least expected. Some top security analysts in Ghana have warned that the public agitation over the mining-related human rights abuses and neglect in the district is a "ticking time bomb."

To avert the looming crisis the security analysts currently foresee, the powers that be, particularly under the new government, must wake up to the situation in the district.

First of all, it must be accepted that the people were given a raw deal. Secondly, ways must be found to resolve the problems of the people.

The central government, the regional administration and the district leadership have a role to play in the matter. Ways must be found to ameliorate the conditions of the people. Since their means of livelihoods have been affected, alternative employment must be a top priority for the people.

The perpetrators responsible for the explosion that killed the 16 young men in 2019 in the district must face a criminal trial. Twenty-one bars of gold said to be worth \$600,000 were seized from Earl by Ghanaian security officials at the Kotoka International Airport on 1 June 2021, while they were reportedly being smuggled out of Ghana. After the seizure, the previous government declined to tell the public the whereabouts of the gold bars. The erstwhile administration must be made to produce the missing 21 bars of gold.

Earl has been accused at least twice of trespassing on concessions owned by other mining groups in the district and has been sued at least twice for the same offence. In 2011, the Minerals Commission wrote a report confirming that the company trespassed on the concession of a local small-scale mining firm called Unique Mining Group.

That group has yet to receive what it calls adequate compensation for the trespass. A community called Namoalugo initiated court action in 2022 against the company with claims that the area where it currently operates belonged to the people of Namoalugo and that the land was fraudulently leased to it. The individuals and groups that have taken the company to court should be backed to receive the justice they deserve.

There are many young people in the new settlements created by Cardinal. They must be trained and decent jobs offered to them in the mining areas. This lack of employment has brought security problems with cases of armed robbery increasing and sometimes leading to deaths of victims.

Also a review of the resettlements must be undertaken. It is important that such a review is done as soon as possible, with the whole place renovated. If new buildings cannot be undertaken, at least the dwellings must be improved.

Cardinal, for at least for five years, must continue to support the people through support for tractors during farming season for those who want to engage in farming.

The people must also be supported to engage in the policy decisions affecting the resettlements. The people must be supported to form committees on all aspects of their lives and the district administration and Cardinal must support them to integrate into their new environment.

Another key area that must be looked at is compensation. According to the *Compensation and Resettlement Legislative Instrument 2175-2012*, people affected by mining must be resettled and compensated. Have the communities been compensated for their lost farmlands?

Moreover, what has happened to the economic trees from which women used to gather fruits for their livelihoods? Who has

received compensation for livelihood loss? If no one has received any compensation yet, when will it be paid? These are issues that need urgent attention. It now remains to be seen if the deprived people of Talensi, who feel enslaved in their own mineral-rich land, will find freedom and justice at long last under a new government that was inaugurated on 7 January 2025.

Conclusion statement

The current challenge concerns who should represent the communities in negotiations over Social Responsibility Agreements with Cardinal Namdini and Earl International (Shaanxi). The Traditional Authorities, led by the Paramount Chief, the Tongrana, believe that the representatives they nominate should speak on behalf of the communities in discussions with the mining companies.

However, TAMCI holds that representation should include all stakeholders, allowing groups the right to select their own representatives. This disagreement has led to further conflicts, including so-called criminal charges against some TAMCI members over social media posts.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has intervened and will lead the negotiation process. It is hoped that this intervention will foster more effective engagement with the mining companies, ultimately benefiting the mining communities.

Responses to SRAN's chapter from other members of the Network

Abahlali

Chapter 4 really resonated with me, in describing the Chinese gold mining company that took the land of the community in order for them to profit. It resonates when if you know the story of Marikana in South Africa, where the mining company took the land to mine, and nearby communities were employed as labour. Mine workers were killed by the police who were defending the company when the workers were protesting for a living wage. Instead of the companies responding to the workers who work hard underground to bring out the gold, they were met with police violence. They were killed

after a long resistance of the mine workers demanding that, since they are the ones who work hard, they need to be shown respect in terms of what they are paid. The lesson that I get from the story, is the way people of Talensi managed to get together—. Resistance is so important because capitalists, when they want to extract profit out of the communities, will always use force and try to push the people away. I can see that what this Chinese company was doing, what they actually planned to do, was to undermine the communities. Despite that, there has been resistance from the community, the labour, the “slaves” of this company. Resistance is always the key to me. If you look at Abahlali’s slogan, when we say “Amandla, awethu” (“Power, to you”) it recognises that as poor communities, whatever that we gain, we would always use resistance.

Things we think others could learn from this chapter and our reflections on it

1. Large-scale extractive industries are a feature of ‘development’ in many parts of the world. In the global South, these industries are often promoted and owned by foreign corporations.
2. Although they are often presented as bringing investment, jobs and ‘development’ to local communities, these corporations more often result in the destruction of the environment, people’s livelihoods, and people themselves. When they do bring projects, like building settlements, these are not improvements on what people already had. What kind of ‘development’ evicts people rather than uplifting them?
3. Politicians and governments usually act to support extractive industries against the interests of their own community. They provide security through the public policing system, sometimes even to the extent of killing their own people.
4. In some cases and some places, the legal system can help local people in their struggles against extractive ‘development’, but this can just as easily be used to support corporations and governments who act on their behalf.
5. The use of divide and rule by corporations and government, pitting parts of the community, or communities, against each other, creates so much chaos and lateral conflict.

CHAPTER 5

The Guatemalan Countryside: Governments Change, Criminalization Remains

Leocadio Juracán Salome,
Comité Campesino del Altiplano

Many years ago in Guatemala, there was a very beautiful place known as Río Negro, which was located on the banks of the immense Chixoy River in the territory of Baja Verapaz. It was a place that covered 1440 hectares of fertile land, which were used by its eight hundred inhabitants for pasture, firewood, crops of corn, beans, herbs and vegetables. It was the ideal place where men hunted animals to feed their families. The land, along with its resources, were the main source of life for the population.

Its valleys had been inhabited by the Mayans and it was the headquarters of many ceremonial activities that formed a link with the past and their culture which they have transmitted from generation to generation orally and in writing.

Río Negro was wonderful. Indigenous communities had lived there since the preclassic Mayan period, bathed by the tiny breezes of the mighty Chixoy River. Families of Achi Mayan origin, settled since the 19th century, drank from its crystalline waters, farmed the valley, fished in the river and raised cattle in the mountains. The women made handicrafts with palm leaves, which they sold in the market of the neighboring town called Xococ in the municipality of Rabinal.

Río Negro was located in the cool jungles of the Verapaces where everything was quiet. Its inhabitants and those of thirteen other neighboring towns lived in peace and harmony.

At the beginning of the 1980s, in many communities in Guatemala, a conflict was raging between the military government and guerrillas over several factors that affected the people of Guatemala: the poor distribution of land and the lack of attention that governments had given to Indigenous peoples. There was no land for crops, poverty increased, human rights were violated, the inequality between rich and poor was such that the tired and desperate population took up arms to fight for a dignified life.

The government of Guatemala, through the Ministry of Defense, began to create Civil Self-Defence Patrols (PAC), supposedly with the objective of protecting communities from guerrilla attacks. This put rural communities themselves in conflict with each other, since many of those who participated in the civil self-defense patrols had relatives who, due to repression, forced disappearances, displacements and murders, saw the need to get involved in the guerrilla ranks.

In many places this caused Indigenous families to betray each other, which is why in several communities in Guatemala a wave of violence and death began that tarnished the peace that existed in the beautiful fields where people worked on farms – even though they did not have labor benefits, lived in dormitories and ate only beans and tortillas.

It is against this backdrop that the story of the massacre of Río Negro needs to be seen. In 1975, Guatemala was governed by General Kjell Eugenio Laugerud García, remembered as a military politician with ties to local mafia. He presented a project to the National Institute of Electrification (INDE) for the construction of the Pueblo Viejo-Quixal Hydroelectric Plant in the Chixoy River basin. This would supposedly solve the country's electricity problems and bring development to the families of Verapaces.

General García considered himself the owner of the lands of Verapaces and used the power he had as president to take over or give to his military friends many lands that did not belong to him because they were national lands.

The proposed large hydroelectric project would be financed by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank

(IDB), who managed the idea of bringing employment, development and sustainability to the inhabitants around the Chixoy River. The problem was that the plan contemplated the flooding of several communities, making it necessary to displace them and resettle them elsewhere.

At first thirteen neighboring communities accepted the proposal because INDE promised to relocate them to a better place. However, from the beginning the community of Río Negro refused to accept the destruction of the 50 kilometers that would be covered by the floods, those fertile valleys that had been cared for by them for generations.

The government was displeased to learn that a single community had rejected the proposal, thereby derailing the permit needed to build the hydroelectric plant. In response, it declared that the project's rejection was the work of subversive forces gaining influence in the country.

Two years later there was a change of government in Guatemala, and due to the economic interest in the construction of a large hydroelectric plant that would bring more benefit to the government than to the communities involved, new president General Fernando Romeo Lucas García, through the INDE, decided to start construction. It is known that his family owned large tracts of land in the area known as the Northern Transversal Strip; they were very close to where the large hydroelectric plant would be built.

During that time, President Lucas García launched a counter-offensive against guerrilla groups that had organised in response to the kidnapping, rape, and massacre of men, women, and children carried out by military officials under the military government.

Among the communities swept up in this counteroffensive were the people of Río Negro, who had become a target for their opposition to the dam. The communities led by the inhabitants of Río Negro refused to leave their lands, their animals and their crops. They were reluctant to leave their history, the sacred places where for many years they performed their ceremonies, where their ancestors were buried, where their grandparents' grandparents were born.

The repression and murder of the inhabitants of Río Negro began on the morning of March 4, 1980, when six community leaders were murdered in front of the community chapel, accused of having stolen the supplies used by the INDE workers who were building the dam on the Chixoy River. A meeting was held to find out who had stolen the workers' supplies, during which the residents reacted by hitting a police officer, so members of the Guatemalan army and an agent of the Traveling Military Police fired towards the gathered population, killing six and wounding one who later died in the Cobán Alta Verapaz hospital.

Months later, Valeriano Osorio Chen and Evaristo Osorio – two leaders of the Río Negro community who were negotiating with INDE over the resettlement of the population – were summoned to a meeting scheduled for 8 July 1980 at one of the state offices in Chinatzul, a town located between Santa Cruz and San Cristóbal Verapaz. They were asked to bring the records of signed agreements and commitments made. Both leaders walked for kilometers under the blazing sun, hoping to return to the village with good news. All they wanted was to be given the opportunity to stay on their land and not be bothered by the government. However, they never returned from that appointment. Several days later, their naked bodies were found in Purulhá, Baja Verapaz, bearing gunshot wounds.

The killings of Valeriano and Evaristo were only the beginning. One hot morning, not long after, several of the community's inhabitants were farming in the green valleys, while others were fishing in the river, when suddenly they were told that a group of armed men had set fire to the market in the neighboring village of Xococ and killed five people. This market was widely visited for its crafts and the variety of things that could be bought there. The Guatemalan army blamed the residents of Río Negro for the fire in Xococ, and used the accusation as a pretext to arm and train the peasants of Xococ against their "enemies."

On February 7, 1982, the Xococ PAC patrolmen summoned several leaders of the Río Negro community to their village under deception, telling them that the order came from the Guatema-

lan army. However, upon arriving in Xococ, the people from Río Negro were yelled at by the PAC patrolmen, who claimed that they were guerrillas and that is why they had burned the market. They took their identification cards and told them that they should return the following Saturday with identification cards of the entire community.

On February 13, 1982, seventy people from the community of Río Negro traveled to Xococ to present their identification cards. There, PAC patrolmen and soldiers, armed with clubs, sticks, nooses, and machetes, surrounded them. Teodora Chen, one of the survivors of the massacre, recalls that around noon, they separated the people into lines, dividing the men from the women and children. The men were taken to a ravine, where they were killed. The rest were gathered in front of a church, tied up, and beaten with clubs and machetes. Survivors were then locked in a building without water or food, some remaining that way for two days, including pregnant women. That day, only two people returned to the community. One of the surviving children, Jesús Tecu Chen, later testified about what he had witnessed.

Despair overtook Río Negro for a long time. That magical place everyone once wanted to live, for the beauty of its great river winding through lush vegetation and vines full of jutes, fish, and crabs, surrounded by immense mountains where, in the afternoons, blankets of cold clouds took refuge, and birds sang as they sought a place to spend the night. Due to the ambition of those who governed at the time, Río Negro became the site of a Mayan genocide, marked by the cruelty its inhabitants suffered at the hands of patrollers and soldiers.

On Sunday, February 14, 1982, the men of the community, afraid of what had happened, left their homes and decided to flee to hide in the mountains. That same day hundreds of soldiers and PAC patrolmen from Xococ arrived in Río Negro, asking each house about the men, whom they accused of having joined the guerrillas. Not finding them, the leader of the patrollers told the women, “If the men do not appear within a month, we will come for you.”

On March 13, 1982, one month later, around six in the morning, members of the Guatemalan army and PAC patrolmen from Xococ arrived at the community of Río Negro, armed with weapons, shovels, pickaxes, nooses, wires and machetes. They went house to house asking about the men, but most were hiding in the mountains for safety reasons. For that reason, they took children, women and the elderly who were forced to walk three kilometers up the mountain without food, receiving insults and mistreatment as they walked. During the journey several women were raped.

Upon reaching Pacoxom hill, the PAC patrolmen and soldiers dug a grave before the killing began. Many were strangled with sticks or ropes. Others fell to machetes, or to gunfire. Babies and children were not spared: they were killed with machetes or seized by the feet or hair and hurled against stones and trees until their small bodies gave out. Survivors were herded into small groups and shot where they stood. When it was over, the dead were thrown into the grave the patrolmen and soldiers had dug for them, then buried under stones and branches. Then, the PAC patrolmen and soldiers chose seventeen spared children and took them to the village of Xococ. Among them was Jesús Tecú Osorio, who would later write his own testimony of what happened that day, in his book titled *Memory of the Río Negro massacres*

Osorio's parents, brothers and many of his friends were killed that day. As he recalls it, the military and PAC paramilitaries rounded up the women and children and accused them of collaborating with the guerrillas. Together they proceeded to rape, torture and murder everyone. About 117 people, including children, were massacred. The few survivors, mostly very young children, were forced into slavery. Osorio describes being enslaved by the leader of Xococ's PAC, the same man who snatched his younger brother from his arms and swung him by his feet, shattering his skull against the rocks before his eyes.

Some of these children offered themselves to be taken by the patrolmen to prevent their mothers from being killed. They were later forced to walk, hungry and thirsty, to Xococ, where some were taken away by soldiers or patrollers, while others were taken

to the village church to be handed over to members of the Xococ community.

The children of Río Negro were forced to live with their oppressors for two to four years, and were forced to work. They were barred from contacting relatives who survived the massacres. Some children were given a new identity, until they were recovered by relatives thanks to efforts made before the municipal authority.

Apart from the 17 children mentioned, few survived the massacre. According to survivors, at least 70 women and 107 children were murdered. The survivors who were able to flee to other communities were persecuted and murdered, such as in the massacre on May 14, 1982 in the Los Encuentros community where 79 people died at the hands of the PAC and the army; and in Agua Fría where 92 people were massacred, some taken away in helicopters and never heard from again.

Another group of survivors fled to the mountains, where they lived without shelter, exposed to army persecution and random gunfire. Others died of hunger and disease. Some women gave birth in the mountains and later registered their children with false dates and places of birth to protect them.

Río Negro disappeared, its inhabitants massacred, tortured, and kidnapped. The black blanket of destruction achieved its objective, and the Chixoy Hydroelectric Plant was built. By January 1983, the project was completed and its gates closed in order to fill the reservoir. This caused the flooding of a large part of the community of Río Negro, Los Encuentros, several archaeological sites and sacred places for the Mayans located in those towns. A report concluded that the development of the dam came at the cost of loss of life, land, and local economies, violated national and international laws, and caused extreme misery in communities that previously had a sustainable way of life.

Only after the implementation of the 1983 general amnesty did some survivors come down from the mountains; they were resettled by the government in the Pacux neighborhood, behind the Rabinal military detachment, where they continued to suffer threats, torture, disappearances, rape, and murder.

As the peace process started, three thousand survivors held a peaceful protest at the site of the dam. The protest lasted two days, ending with an agreement signed between the Government and the leaders of the Communities. Through this effort, they achieved compensation for the violence that accompanied the construction of the hydroelectric plant, totaling 22 million quetzales, of which they initially received only 85,883.

Two hundred and eighty-nine survivors of the Río Negro massacres, identified by representatives still residing in the semi-urban neighborhood of Pacux, signed a “political agreement” between the Government of Guatemala and the Coordinator of Communities Affected by the Construction of the Chixoy Hydroelectric Plant (COCAHICH)—among them the community of Río Negro—for the “identification, verification and, where appropriate, the Reparations Plan of the damages caused to said communities by the construction of the Reservoir and the Chixoy River Dam.”

Based on this agreement, the State of Guatemala committed to a series of measures spanning housing, infrastructure, land, and social services. In terms of housing and infrastructure, it built 150 homes and four public buildings in Pacux, including a “Catholic church, school, health centre and community hall,” and provided the community with a “nixtamal mill, water through a pumping system and an elevated cistern.” For basic services, “one hundred and fifty half-straws of water were purchased,” and “electricity was introduced for home drainage and access roads.” On land and livelihood, six farms were given communally for crop cultivation, “three blocks per family.” And in terms of training and social support, the agreement provided “primary education teachers, nursing assistants, cultural promoters and training in loom weaving, construction of Lorena stoves and livestock-type aspects.”

According to the survivors living in Pacux, living conditions are precarious and the land is not suitable for subsistence agriculture. There is no longer a river to fish in, archaeological sites no longer exist, there are no permanent jobs, there is a lack of drinking water, the rivers are polluted, there is no wood, the community is growing and do not have the resources they need, and there is no longer

enough land for everyone.

That is why, sitting next to the fire, one rainy night, an old woman from the remembered community of Río Negro, clinging to a cup of coffee, remembered the following: “One night I walked to escape death, that is why this reparation is a right not a gift. I remember that in Río Negro we had land to grow vegetables, fruits and herbs, now we no longer have it and we have to buy everything. I hope the steps of progress will never again trample people’s rights.”

After years of investigations, exhumations, trials, the dismantling of clandestine cemeteries, and a persistent fight for survivors’ rights, several former PAC patrolmen and soldiers have been arrested. They were convicted and remain in prison. An arrest warrant was also issued against former colonel José Antonio Solares González as the intellectual author of the murders; however, despite repeated efforts, he has not been captured.

For its part, the State has recognised its “total acceptance” of responsibility for the violations alleged by the Commission, to the detriment of Ramona Lajuj and Manuel Chen Sánchez. However, it did not comment on the other people mentioned by the Commission and the representatives.

One of the conclusions of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights is that the State of Guatemala is responsible for the violation of the rights recognised in Article 22.1 of the American Convention, in relation to Article 1.1 thereof, to the detriment of the survivors of the Río Negro massacres who live in the Pacux Colony.

Responses to Chapter 5 from other members of the Network

Radio Ada:

It was about the same time, 1980 or thereabouts, that the first Songor struggle began. In 1985, a pregnant woman was shot dead in her home. At that time there was disturbance between the police and Indigenous communities who were fighting for their lives. It was the same period when the government of Ghana, through the traditional authorities, gave the lagoon to an investor. That resulted

in the investor prohibiting all locals from winning salt for their livelihoods. The continuous striving of the local communities to make ends meet resulted in them being beaten and shot by the police in a new era of destruction of local rights, of Indigenous rights.

What happened in the Río Negro story, with how the military government divided people against each other, using the PACs, also reminds me of how the government in Ghana uses the traditional authorities against the people.

I am also reminded of the compensation that has not been paid to people in Ada. *The Mining Act in Ghana* is very clear on what compensation should be given to people displaced by mining, but the promises made are not always delivered.

Church Land Programme:

The timeline might not be the same, but I am finding similarities with what is happening in KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa) right now. This chapter resonates with the story of the dam that is being built in iMpindle, in KwaZulu-Natal. What is happening in iMpindle today feels like an echo vibrating from another time, another dam, another community that was told to sacrifice itself in the name of development. As the government pushes ahead with the new dam, you can feel the ground shifting under people's feet – not just physically, but politically and spiritually. The community is splitting, reshaping itself around fear, promises, rumours, and the quiet knowledge that once the land goes, something deeper goes with it. The dam brought loss – loss of land, loss of livelihoods, loss of life. The development was sold as a national triumph, but the communities living closest to the dam site carried the cost. Their sustainable way of life was drowned, and their suffering was not an accident but a predictable outcome of decisions made far away, by people who would never face the consequences.

This story teaches us that the worst violence is often slow. It is families pushed into unfamiliar land. It is grazing routes cut off. It is the community's economic independence slowly replaced with dependence on the very state that displaced them. It is the psychological weight of realising the world you built for yourself no longer exists. Mpindle's struggle is not just about a dam. It is about who

gets to decide what life looks like, a similar experience to what the community of Río Negro lived through. It is about refusing the narrative that rural people must die – politically, economically, culturally – so that someone else’s development can live.

The issue of compensation is also the same in South Africa. People displaced by ‘development,’ like mining, are promised compensation – but this is not delivered as promised.

Things we think others could learn from this chapter and our reflections on it

1. Across time and space, ‘development’ seems to favour a few at the expense of many; although it is often argued to be for the benefit of all.
2. This model of development does not consult with people, may seriously violate people’s human rights, and is sometimes extremely violent.
3. It often fundamentally separates people from what they need for their livelihoods.
4. Frequently, this model of development also disconnects people from the natural environment.
5. Quite often, people are offered some kind of compensation where it is clear that ‘development’ will actually harm them (or has harmed them), and when people protest as a result – but often, promises made are not kept. Promises of compensation are simply a way to get what those in favour of the development want.
6. All of this is occurring in the midst of a climate crisis and how, in spite of grave human rights violations, massacres, imprisonment, persecution of Indigenous people, in spite of those adversities, movements keep fighting for the survival of humanity, to stop the climate crisis.
7. When the state, or powerful state-sponsored forces, dispossess communities, they are essentially killing dispossessed communities because they uproot them. They kill their roots. It is the responsibility of the state to protect people, but they still do this, or allow it to happen.

CHAPTER 6

Nothing about us without us – Everybody Thinks!

Thapelo Mohapi,
Abahlali baseMjondolo Movement SA
General Secretary

When our movement started in 2005 many of the people who founded the movement insisted that everybody thinks, and that the poor must be given the same right as everyone else to participate in all discussions and decision-making affecting their lives and communities, as well as wider issues.

There were two reasons for this. One was that the ruling party and the government thought that its role was to think for poor people. The second was that some NGOs and academics also thought that their role was to think for poor people. This included liberals and the kind of leftists who see their role as giving leadership to the oppressed rather than working with the oppressed on the basis of mutual respect.

In the recent floods that are caused by climate change we have seen that the poor, particularly those who live in shack settlements are the most affected. In Durban, where six people lost their lives in the Lamontville area, the people were relocated by the government in an area that is prone to flooding. The people had no say in the relocation. That's because they are not regarded as human beings, but human waste that is supposed to be dumped in human dumping areas. We simply do not count in the eyes of this government.

Before we can speak about development we need to address the issue of dignity; for as long as governments in the world criminalise

poverty and see the poor as the enemy, we will not be able to address other societal issues. The foundation of development is treating the poor with respect and dignity. There therefore needs to be a political solution to change the social structures that keep us poor. Our movement has been fighting for the past 20 years for the recognition and dignity of the poor through consolidating the power of the impoverished from below.

It is important to understand that colonialism did not just expropriate land and cattle from African people, and then labour. It also expropriated the right of African people to make decisions about their own lives and communities. Just as we struggle for land to be returned to the people, and to be shared fairly among the people, and just as we struggle for wealth to be restored to the people, and to be shared fairly among the people, we also struggle for the right of all people to be able to participate in all discussions and decision-making.

This is why we adopted the slogan ‘Nothing for us without us!’ which was originally developed by the disabled movement in the United Kingdom. This is why we adopted the phrase ‘grass-roots urban planning’ for our comrades in the urban movement in Brazil. This is why Ashraf Cassiem, the leader of the militant Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign, developed the slogan ‘We are poor not stupid!’

We insist that the poor must be afforded the opportunity to be part of their own development, whether this is autonomous self-organised development from below or development that emerges from engagement between the oppressed and the state and NGOs.

It is often perceived that when you are poor and living in shack settlements, former Bantustans or on White farms, you cannot think about how the future development of your community must take shape. This is often the perception of the Western donors who fund governments and NGOs in Africa. This is seen as a ‘realistic’ view and the idea that poor people can think and plan for themselves is dismissed as ‘romantic.’

Such thinking leads to development being imposed on communities, sometimes at gunpoint. Sometimes people in commun-

ities are paid to support the development against the majority who do not support this. This divides communities and leads to tensions and revolts. Sometimes what is called ‘development’ is actually just more oppression, such as when people are forcibly removed from centrally located shack settlements to human dumping grounds far from the cities, dumping grounds where there are no opportunities. All this could be avoided if poor people were taken seriously as people, as people with the same right to participate in discussions and decisions as others. Being poor does not mean that your capacity to think for yourself has collapsed. Every human being can think. Being poor means that you don’t have money, not that you don’t have a mind.

Many communities who have occupied land in our movement have planned their development without the interference of government and NGOs. Autonomy, self-organisation and self-management have achieved some incredible results, radical results.

One example is the eKhenana land occupation in Durban which was developed into a commune. There you can see the results of careful, collaborative grassroots urban planning with welllaid-out homes as well as a communal garden, a communal poultry project, as well as a political school named after the great revolutionary intellectual Frantz Fanon. A high price was paid for this. Three comrades were assassinated.

No government or NGO official would understand the need to centre development around a political school. This is because the poor are seen as victims who need services to be ‘delivered’ not as political protagonists who want to change the world from below. For us, building communes means building the political power of the poor from below as well as meeting basic material needs.

Not long ago the municipality tried to evict Hlanganani (meaning ‘coming together’), one of our occupations in Salt Rock, on the north coast of KwaZulu-Natal. The people in the community resisted the eviction and forced the municipality to listen to them. They refused to be treated as human waste and protested to demand their recognition as human beings. This led to the municipality in KwaDukuza to finally recognise them as people and



Salt Rock AbM Branch holding banner that says 'Nothing about us without us' (photo by Zodwa Nsibande)

give them the dignity that they deserve. Respectful engagement is usually something that must be struggled for.

Today the community is part of the development in their community. They discuss and plan as a community about how the area can be developed. This has made the work of the municipal officials much easier. The development will not only provide housing, it will also provide skills that will create employment opportunities beyond the development. This happens because the community is part of the development.

We have made real progress with both completely autonomous forms of development and forms of development with the state, but in both cases, progress is only possible when people insist on the right to think and decide for themselves. In both cases people had to be organised and had to resist the forces of repression before progress could be made.

Often when people refuse to be treated as people who can't think and have no right to think, the first response of the state (or NGOs, academics, etc.) is to claim that someone else is thinking for them, controlling them remotely from a distance, and to criminalise the community or its leaders.

We don't need think tanks to think for us. We don't need people who have never lived in a shack settlement to think for us. We need people who are willing to think *with* us. For university-educated people this requires that they are willing to humble themselves, to understand that they are people among other people. People can learn important skills in universities but these skills need to be brought into conversation with the people, with the organic thinking of the people.

A radical state, NGO or academic should understand the difference between charity provided to victims of history and solidarity with people who are committed to making history, to changing the world. Development should be about popular political empowerment as well as meeting basic material needs.

Everybody thinks!

Responses to Chapter 6 from other members of the Network

CLP:

This chapter reminds me of the article written by the former General Secretary of Abahlali in 2007: <https://bit.ly/4q0cJmT> . The irony in this is the fact that 18 years later, the marginalised are still experiencing the same treatment.

SRAN:

The title of this chapter really sticks. There is a difference, though, about how land issues emerge in the Abahlali context (South Africa) versus our context in Northern Ghana. For us, land is connected to families and we have a lot of problems with inheritance as a result, but that is inter-family conflict, so it's not at the level of the state. It is not at a level like the case of the history of apartheid and how it affects South Africa.

Venceremos:

In response to Abahlali's discussion on the impact of colonization on not just land and behaviour from African people, but also their ability to determine their own lives, I would also add the indoctrination and colonization of the minds of the people. This allowed the so-called leftists to be in the driver's seat with people: Abahlali

rather insists the people should be in the driver's seat, but the history of colonialism has created a mindset that has to be fought against to make this a reality.

The idea that the so-called relocations of communities of poor people are actually dumping grounds for the state to abandon people with few or no opportunities is similar to what is happening in Zalerigu in Ghana, where the mining company Cardinal Nambini evicts people from their longstanding homes and farming lands, and dumps them in a place where they have no arable land to farm, let alone conducive conditions for them to live.

For instance, in planning and designing the new infrastructure of the place where people will be relocated, the company and state think they are providing superior accommodation. However the architectural design and the structures the people designed for themselves adapt to the environmental conditions people face; the company and state put up structures that supposedly represent modernity, but don't suit the people. It's like a dumping ground that doesn't take into account the living conditions of the people.

For example, the thatch hut of the traditional design allowed for cooling when it is warm outside; the state/company-provided structures require air conditioning. This seems to resonate with what Abahlali is experiencing in South Africa. So the so-called educated elite say, "Oh, they've built a zinc-roofed house for you, with concrete block walls, you should leave your traditional homes," but this ignores the genius of these traditional designs for this particular environment. The block houses do not respond well to the heat, and yet this is held up as development, and the relocated communities are just expected to accept this and live with it.

Why not instead work with people to design the architecture that people would want to live in, rather than tell them what development is?

Things we think others could learn from this chapter and our reflections on it

1. There are differences in our experiences, because of different ways that land is held and distributed in our different countries.
2. But there are also many things in common. One of these is the

way in which people are often left out of decisions about what ‘development’ is, and how it should happen.

3. This means that people’s thinking and knowledge cannot be drawn on – this is a real problem, because people think, and their thinking is powerful and helpful.
4. Unfortunately, even so-called democratic or even ‘leftist’ governments believe that people cannot think, and that they need to do the thinking for them.
5. Sadly, despite people’s protests and their claims to the right to determine their own lives and their own development, this situation has remained the same over decades. This shows how the state doesn’t belong to the people; it is taken over by the controlling classes.
6. Our struggles in different contexts are similar, or even the same; people who stand up against ‘development’ are criminalised and called evil and against improvement. ‘Development’ does not represent Indigenous groups, environmentalists, or rural people – it is against us. No matter the government, the state represses. This underscores how ‘development’ is not in our interest.

CHAPTER 7

The Struggle to Keep a People's Heart Beating: The Songor and Radio Ada

Text and photos:
Gideon Amanor Dzeagu, Radio Ada

“We live because Songor lives on. Once we lose Songor, we die, and that is why we are dying.”

This was the cry, translated from the Dangme language, of a deprived salt producer during a community engagement organised by Radio Ada in November 2024 at Matseko, one of the communities abutting the Songor lagoon.

In Totope, another community near the Songor, a community member declared emphatically, “If Radio Ada were to cease to exist today, then we would cease to live as humans in Ada.”

These statements reveal the depth of attachment between the people of Ada and the Songor lagoon, as well as the trust that communities have placed in Radio Ada over the years.

To understand these emotions, one must first understand what the Songor is, what it has meant to generations of Ada people, and why the struggle over it has become one of the most significant natural resource struggles in contemporary Ghana.

Songor lagoon: the sacred communal heritage

The Songor lagoon is located in the Ada traditional area in south-eastern Ghana. It is the richest salt lagoon in West Africa. Traditionally a communal resource, in recent decades it has been coveted by private interests.

For generations, the Songor has served as the economic and cultural heartbeat of its surrounding communities. The lagoon is not merely a natural resource; it is deeply tied to identity,

spirituality, survival and communal life. It is revered as a sacred gift from the Yomo deity. The lagoon has been used as a communal resource for livelihood by all members of the community and even beyond. Anyone, including people from outside Ada, could win salt, provided only that they did so during the ritually prescribed season and paid the minimal toll.

Through Indigenous practices developed over centuries, families and clans accessed salt-winning areas that promoted shared benefits and coexistence. It supported livelihoods, funded education, facilitated trade, and formed an important part of the social and cultural organisation of the Ada people. The communal practice surrounding the lagoon ensured that access remained collective rather than concentrated in the hands of a few individuals.

However, over the years, this communal understanding increasingly came under threat. Different governments, business interests, and some traditional authorities gradually promoted the idea of private ownership and centralised control over the lagoon.

The history of conflict around the Songor is long and painful. In 1979 a sizeable concession of the lagoon was awarded exclusively to one individual. Community resistance was met by armed police force, and in 1985 a bystander, a pregnant mother named Margaret “Maggie” Kuwornu, was shot dead by a police bullet. Her death became hugely symbolic because of the traditional belief that the Yomo deity who protected the lagoon forbade bloodshed around the resource. Maggie’s killing represented a major violation of that sacred understanding.

Following the community agitation around the killing of Maggie, in 1992 the then government, the Provisional National Defence Council, passed PNDC Law 287, which mandated the development of the Songor “to benefit the contiguous communities and the public interest.” The preamble to the law clearly states that the law was to facilitate the implementation of the Master Plan for Salt Production in Ghana. The Master Plan was the product of extensive community consultation in the Songor and, with Cuban technical support, provided for an inclusive framework that would

allow both the Songor communities and commercial interests access to the Songor.

PNDC Law 287 has to date not been repealed, but subsequent governments have tried to hand over the Songor to private commercial interests to the exclusion of the Songor communities. However, no access was as total as the award given to a company called Electrochem.

The concession to Electrochem seriously impacted not only the community but also Radio Ada.

Radio Ada and the Songor Communities

Since Radio Ada first went on air in February 1998, the station has maintained a unique relationship with communities around the Songor lagoon.

Radio Ada was established as a non-profit, non-sectarian and non-partisan community radio station rooted in the language, culture and daily realities of the Ada people. Radio Ada describes itself as a “different kind of Radio.” Radio Ada’s approach to broadcasting places communities at the center of programming decisions through participatory planning and engagement. The station broadcasts entirely in the local language, Dangme. Programs are developed with direct community involvement, ensuring that local concerns, experiences and aspirations shape the content.

Over the years, Radio Ada has served as a platform for community education and dialogue. In particular, through its broadcasts, communities have gained greater understanding of their traditional rights surrounding the lagoon as well as broader legal and human rights frameworks, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples through oral knowledge-sharing and mutual learning. This relationship between Radio Ada and the Songor communities was not built overnight. It developed through years of engagement, trust-building, and consistent presence during difficult moments in community life. Communities came to see the station not simply as a broadcaster, but as a trusted space where their voices, concerns and experiences could be heard.



ASLA community relations officer (Abraham Tetteh Ahumah Karimu) explaining communities captured under the privatised concession

In early 2000, Radio Ada received a tip that a major Songor concession was about to be given to a private investor. Its producers went around the Songor to ask if community members had heard of the development and what they thought of it. The answer to both questions was “no.” The entire discussion was broadcast.

As communities became more informed, they organised themselves in different ways to defend communal access to the Songor. While some groups emerged independently, Radio Ada played an important role in facilitating broader alliances such as the Ada Songor Advocacy Forum (ASAF). Women also became central voices in the struggle. The Yihi Katseme group, meaning “brave women,” emerged as one of the strongest movements advocating for equitable access to the lagoon. In April 2016 they produced a manifesto, “Songor for All,” which revived the communal philosophy that the lagoon should benefit all Ada people rather than a privileged few.

Around 2020, however, the relationship began to show strains. Mysterious developments were happening around the Songor. The people expected Radio Ada to report on them, but Radio Ada was also in the dark.

Outing of Electrochem takeover

Finally, in May 2021, the mystery was solved. Authentic documents lawfully required from Parliament were handed over to Radio Ada. They included a mining lease agreement dated 29 October 2020 through which the government awarded the Songor to Electrochem with immediate effect. It was a monopoly award covering 39,141.5 acres or 158.4 sq km or virtually the entire Songor lagoon. The accompanying business plan provided by Electrochem to Parliament also showed that the surrounding communities would be evacuated and provided “alternative livelihoods.” No information on the concession had been made public.

On 2nd May 2021, on its Sunday afternoon program, Manor Munyu, Radio Ada began broadcasting translations of key sections of the documents. The program became an important platform for community discussions, education, and mobilization around issues affecting the Songor.

The take-over of the Songor lagoon by Electrochem marked a new and difficult phase in the history of the resource. Community members increasingly felt excluded from decisions affecting their livelihood. Many testified that both the government and some traditional authorities kept them in the dark regarding the negotiations and agreement surrounding the concession. According to the Songor communities, there was no community engagement, consultation and zero involvement or participatory representation by the communities.



Tradition in the face of repression – Libation pouring to call on ancestors is termed as “practice of existence” that sustains the community’s life.

As the company expanded operations, access to large portions of the lagoon became restricted. Community salt pans were destroyed in the communities, while local salt winners found themselves accused of trespassing on lands they have used for generations. The resulting tensions led to repeated confrontations between communities, company security personnel, and state security agencies.

Criminalization of traditional livelihoods

One of the major consequences of the takeover has been the criminalization of traditional salt-winning activities. In addition to constant intimidation, community members have faced arrests, police brutality and prosecutions.

In total, 76 community members have been arrested, detained and prosecuted. Some spent weeks in detention. In one instance, a lactating mother was arrested, the husband took the baby to see the mother and the husband was put in the police detention cells in place of the wife for 14 days.

At one point, 71 community members faced court charges linked to activities on the lagoon. Many of the accused came from communities whose families have depended on the lagoon for generations. After years of court appearances and financial hardships, 69 of the accused persons were acquitted and discharged due to lack of evidence by the state prosecutors. However, two others



Songor community members demonstrating in Ghana's capital

continue to face ongoing legal proceedings as at July 2026.

For many community members, these prosecutions represent more than legal disputes. They are seen as deliberate attempts to exhaust and intimidate communities financially and psychologically. The prolonged legal battles have imposed heavy burdens on already struggling families whose livelihoods have been disrupted by loss of access to the lagoon. At the same time, many of the developmental promises associated with the takeover including community salt pans, infrastructure, and other social benefits have either not materialised or remained inaccessible to local community members. Instead, many communities report worsening poverty, lack of clean water, unemployment and increasing migration among young people.

Attacks on Radio Ada and freedom of the press

As Radio Ada continued giving to the affected communities, the station itself increasingly became a target. Pressure came from multiple directions, including some traditional authorities, political actors, and individuals connected to the investor. Complaints were lodged against Radio Ada at Ghana’s National Media Commission in attempts to stop the station’s Songor-related programming.

On 13 January 2022, Radio Ada was attacked by an unknown group of thugs. They beat up and molested the staff and vandalised the equipment. They left a message before leaving: “Stop the Songor programs.”

Then in August 2022, the station was banned from the annual Asafotufiami festival, an event it had traditionally covered for the wider Ada community since 1998.

Lead program producer Noah Narh Dameh was later arrested on allegations of defamation and thrown into jail for eight days. Many viewed the arrest as an attempt to intimidate the station and discourage critical reporting on the Songor **conflict**.

Two intersecting demises

Radio Ada Community Radio journalist par excellence Noah Dameh passed away on 17 September 2023 at the age of 49. His death has been tied to his constant harassment and the time he spent in the police detention cells.



The integral role of brave women in the Songor resilience has been displayed when the communities mobilised to demonstrate against the government and chiefs in the country's capital Accra in 2022

Not quite two months later, on 6 November 23, a tragic incident occurred in a Songor community called Toflokpo. Community members gathered to support residents whose salt pans were being destroyed with bulldozers by staff and landguards of Electrochem in the presence of the police. In the ensuing chaos, 52-year-old John Korletey Agormedah was shot three times in the back and died at the scene. His death deeply shocked the Songor communities. To date, no one has been prosecuted for his killing. The police investigation has stalled, with key forensic processes remaining incomplete.

Intimidation, resistance and resilience

John Korletey Agormedah left behind a bedridden father and a wife, among many other dependents. For many community members, his death became another painful symbol of the human cost of losing communal access to the lagoon.

Community members view the takeover of the Songor as a test of the resilience and determination to protect their ancestral heritage.

The lagoon remains the foundation of economic survival for many families. Losing access has pushed many people deeper into poverty and forced others to migrate elsewhere in search of work. During a Radio Ada community engagement in Matseko in 2024, a deprived salt producer described the situation as deliberate attempt to drain the blood of the people into one basket for the benefit of a single investor. He declared, “We live because Songor lives on. Once we lose Songor, we die, and that is why we are dying.”

Many of these actions are widely perceived by the community members as attempts to silence resistance. Despite these hardships, the resolve of the communities has remained strong. The priest of the lagoon deity, Libi Wornor Amartey Apedo Ayornu, described the struggle as a sacred responsibility, saying: “Dying on the battlefield is more honourable than dying silently in one’s room.”

Even after enduring arrest and weeks of detention, a 60-year-old woman from a Songor community insisted, “They can do all this to me, but once their knife has not cut my throat, I will continue to speak against the total takeover of the lagoon.” The body of Korletey Agormeda remains in the morgue as of July 2026 because the family believes he should not be buried until justice is served.

These stories reflect the depth of attachment that the people have to the Songor lagoon and their determination to defend it despite mounting pressure.

Their experiences and concerns continue to be given voice by Radio Ada.

Hope, memory, and the future of the Songor

The struggle over the Songor lagoon remains deeply connected to historical memories within Ada. Many community members continue to draw parallels between the death of Margaret Kuwornu in 1985 and the killing of John Korletey Agormedah nearly four decades later. Both situations symbolise moments when conflict over the lagoon turned deadly.

The memory of past struggles continues to inspire resistance today. Communities hope for a future in which the lagoon once



Cladding the Songor historical remains of Margaret Kuwornu in red signifies a season of danger

again serves as a communal resource, once again to be “Songor for All” rather than a narrow concentration of power and worth.

For Radio Ada also, the Songor story is ultimately about more than salt. It is about belonging, identity, justice, dignity and survival.

The voices from Matseko, Totope, Tofloko, Bonikope, Nakomkope, Kablevu and other Songor communities reveal a people determined not to be silenced. Their struggle continues, rooted in the belief that the Songor lagoon is not simply land or water, but the heartbeat of the Ada people themselves.

Responses to Chapter 7 from other members of the Network

CLP:

The main lessons that can be learned is the importance of community resilience and determination in the face of adversity. Despite facing numerous challenges, arrests, brutality, and intimidation, the Songor communities have remained steadfast in their

fight for their rights and access to the lagoon, which is crucial to their livelihood. The story reminds me of the experience of one collective in Newcastle, Northern KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This community was resisting a coal mine. They were also subjected to a three-year-long court battle; in the end, the case was thrown out of court after the people had made a deal with the mining company? (devil?), not to protest. It's inspiring to learn that there are communities that are able to persist in pushing for what they believe is right and not be intimidated by the powerful, supported by law enforcement. This highlights the importance of standing up against injustice and human rights violations, even in the face of adversity. The community's refusal to back down and their continued advocacy for their rights serve as a powerful example of the importance of fighting for what is rightfully theirs.

Another lesson is the critical role that community-based organisations like Radio Ada play in empowering and supporting local communities. Radio Ada's commitment to giving voice to the Songor communities and providing them with education and awareness about their human rights has been instrumental in their struggle for justice.

The lack of progress in the investigation into Korlety Agormeda's death and the attack on Radio Ada is a stark reminder of the systemic failures that need to be addressed to ensure that justice is served.

The inclusion of people's voices via quotes makes the story interesting and gives the human feeling element to the story.

I would have liked to know about how women (Yihi Katseme) fight the harmful practices, and how that has contributed to the growth of the women who participate – or their decline.

SRAN:

This is a great piece and easy reading. I would have liked to know more about the role of the traditional authorities to emphasise who supports whom. I would assume that some of the traditional authorities support the struggle of ownership of Songor by the communities.

Things we think others could learn from this chapter and our reflections on it

1. The struggle can be a very long one. It takes very high degrees of commitment and sacrifice. It can also affect different groups of people differently (e.g. women, or the youth). The role of women in the struggle needs to be recognised as an essential part of the process, and in keeping it going.
2. Although it is important for movements to lead the struggle, support organisations can really help, particularly because the struggle is a long and hard one. In particular, the role of community radio in amplifying the voices of communities in struggle really adds to the strength of the struggle compared to those with no media support.
3. Those who use ‘development’ for their own gain (and to the detriment of communities) often do so with the support of the state, including its legal and law enforcement sectors.
4. In places where there is some kind of traditional authority, it is important to think through the role they are playing, and who this serves.
5. As Indigenous livelihoods are being defended, it needs to be seen that this is important not just for the ways in which it keeps communities alive, and cultures ongoing, but also for the ways in which this livelihood activity contributes to the broader economy. This aspect of the struggle is often overlooked.

CHAPTER 8

Translation, Care, and Political Commitment in the Translocal Learning Network

Wojciech Tokarz

Ro Paradela Guerrero

A Ghanaian, a Canadian, a South African, and a Guatemalan walk into... a translocal network. It sounds like the setup for a joke – one likely built around cultural differences, stereotypes, and linguistic misunderstandings. But beyond potential punchlines, the work of the TLN presents real complexities where translation is more than a tool – it is fundamental infrastructure for mutual understanding and collaborative action. This chapter explores the practice and politics of translation within the TLN, examining the strategies developed to bridge cultural divides and enable horizontal knowledge exchange. We highlight the pivotal role of translation and translators in facilitating social learning across linguistic and cultural boundaries while interrogating how power operates within these communicative acts. In doing so, we outline the core mechanisms of translation – domestication and foreignisation – and discuss how these concepts are adapted and challenged within the specific dynamics of the TLN. Through this lens, we illuminate how translation functions not merely as linguistic transfer, but as a socially embedded process of negotiation, interpretation, and connection that actively shapes whose voices are heard and how knowledge circulates.

Central to this process is the collaboration of the network's translators and co-authors of this chapter: Ro Paradela, the network's primary translator, who employs gender-inclusive Spanish

and strategic domestication to foster belonging, challenge cishet-eropatriarchal norms, and advance decolonial ethics in their translation work; and Wojciech Tokarz, the backup translator, professor of Spanish and Latin American literature and Dean of Arts at St. Francis Xavier University in Canada, who brings reflections on translation informed by his academic positionality. Together, they navigate the consequences and complexities of translation, which within the TLN becomes relational labour that shapes power dynamics, preserves narrative authority, and cultivates horizontal knowledge exchange across linguistic boundaries.

Rather than positioning the translator as a neutral conduit, we argue that translation is always political – a site where ethical commitments, identity, and solidarity are negotiated alongside meaning itself.

Navigating multiplicity: language, culture, and identity across the network

The TLN brings together organisations and individuals from diverse cultural, political, professional, and linguistic backgrounds, each carrying a distinct sense of identity. Spanning four countries across three continents, the network operates in a space where language both connects and complicates. English serves as the primary working language for participants from Ghana, South Africa, and Canada, while Spanish fulfills that role for those from Guatemala. Yet even these shared languages function largely as *linguae francae* rather than native tongues.

This linguistic complexity only deepens when viewed more closely. The academic group from Canada includes individuals of Mexican, Polish, and English Canadian heritage, each navigating multiple languages beyond their mother tongues. Participants from Ghana speak Talensi and Dangme alongside English, while the South African contingent includes IsiZulu speakers. In Guatemala, where Spanish is the dominant language of communication, some participants speak Maya Achi, adding yet another layer of linguistic complexity. But language is only one facet of difference – the TLN also navigates cultural and ideological divides. Some participants come from countries where LGBTQIA+ rights are legally

recognised and protected, while others work in contexts where anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation remains in effect. Words themselves carry different meanings and weight: for some, terms like *comrade* symbolise solidarity and shared struggle, while for others, like Wojciech, who grew up in communist Poland, the same word evokes painful historical associations. In this complex landscape, translation is not merely a technical process – it is a cultural practice essential to negotiating inclusivity and dialogue. We strive to make as many voices heard as possible, and every perspective acknowledged, allowing TLN to function as a truly translocal space of learning. Rooted in struggle, TLN was designed not only to connect diverse social movements but also to create a space where the sharing of culturally and linguistically distinct experiences could inspire and empower all participants and the discourses they produce.

Translation as cultural negotiation: power, politics, and ethics

To the uninitiated, translation may seem like a straightforward task – a transparent transfer of meaning from one language to another. In reality, however, it is a far more intricate and layered process. Each language encodes distinct cultural meanings, structural logics, and epistemologies. As a result, translation inevitably diverges from the original to some degree in order to convey meaning in ways that resonate with the target audience. Despite these divergences, translations are often judged successful when they read or sound fluid, natural, and unobtrusive – so much so that they appear to directly reflect the original author’s voice and intent, as if they were not translations at all.

Building on this widespread perception of fluency, Lawrence Venuti (1995, 18-19) critiques the notion of translation as a neutral or invisible act. He argues that fluency, far from being a benign feature, is a culturally and ideologically loaded practice. Readability, in this view, is not simply a matter of style, but a mechanism of domestication – a strategy that rewrites the foreign to fit comfortably within dominant norms. In the process, the translator’s role is obscured, the foreign is rendered familiar. As such, translation becomes complicit in reinforcing hegemonic values and marginalising difference,

and may even serve as a tool in the reproduction of colonial attitudes, cultural hierarchies, or geopolitical agendas. For Venuti, the “violence” of translation is therefore both inherent to the act itself and dependent on the broader social and historical context in which it occurs. Yet domestication is not the only available strategy. Venuti identifies foreignisation as an alternative approach – one that deliberately retains traces of the source culture, often disrupting the flow of the target language to signal the text’s origin and preserve its cultural specificity. Foreignisation challenges readers’ linguistic habits and alters their perception of the foreign, resisting the pressure to make the unfamiliar conform to dominant norms.

These competing strategies – domestication and foreignisation – take on particular significance within the context of the TLN, where translation is not merely a technical necessity but a means of enacting the network’s core values. Translation within the TLN serves a dual role: bridging diverse academic and grassroots organisations, while also affirming the cultural and linguistic differences that are central to the network’s identity. Diversity is not a barrier to collaboration; rather, it is the foundation of the TLN’s strength and purpose. The network’s aim is to share situated perspectives on global challenges – such as gender-based violence, climate change, and coloniality – as they are experienced in distinct local contexts. These stories of struggle are culturally embedded, shaped by the values, vocabularies, and strategies of resistance specific to each community. Domestication and foreignisation, therefore, must be deployed carefully. Excessive domestication risks erasing the very differences that the network values, while uncritical foreignisation may hinder accessibility and mutual understanding. The challenge is to strike a balance: to render translations comprehensible without neutralising the distinct voices and epistemologies they carry. In this way, translation within the TLN becomes a practice of negotiation – one that resists assimilation and affirms plurality – but also an act that intentionally creates a sense of belonging while fostering solidarity through shared struggle. It enables participants to recognise and appreciate different ways of knowing, acting, and relating. The act of translation makes space for unfamiliar framings

of familiar problems and opens up new paths for empathy, imagination, and political solidarity.

A tangible outcome of this translocal collaboration is the production of publications – such as the present volume – developed in English and accompanied by Spanish translations. These texts are typically coordinated by academic partners whose scholarly backgrounds are often shaped by Eurocentric or colonial epistemologies. Moreover, the research and publication processes are frequently supported by funding bodies such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), which influence not only what kinds of knowledge are supported but also how they are framed and disseminated. These asymmetries introduce complex power relations that must be carefully navigated in order to preserve the TLN's ethos of equity and mutual respect.

Translation as care: language, power, and belonging in the Translocal Network

Before examining how we balance different translation strategies in the TLN, it is important to introduce Ro, the research assistant responsible for the network's translation work, and Wojciech, the multilingual academic who has spent his entire life perfecting his craft within the highly demanding but also restrictive world of university work.

Ro started working in the TLN as an international student residing in Canada, originally from Mexico City, who has been bilingual for as long as they can remember. Although not a professional translator, they often joke that their first language is actually Spanglish, as they think in and have been communicating with others in Spanglish for most of their life, seamlessly code-switching between Spanish and English. As a result, Ro's translation approach is unconventional – quirky, improvisational, and inventive – yet highly effective due to their intuitive command of both languages and their ability to switch between them with remarkable fluidity and speed. This organic bilingualism, rooted in lived experience rather than formal methodology, enables Ro to navigate the nuances of meaning and cultural context in ways that are responsive to the specific communicative needs of the TLN.

Wojciech, on the other hand, is bilingual in Polish and French, spent part of his life in Yugoslavia (where Slovenian was his first foreign language), and has near-native proficiency in English and Spanish, both languages he learned as an adult. He constantly navigates and translates between the cultures of these four languages, using them daily in his professional and personal life. He is an engaged scholar in questions of cultural translation, including the representation of Indigeneity in settler societies. Last but not least, he is an administrator with ambitions to lead his faculty to unite and engage in what Rutger Bregman (2025) calls moral ambition – the drive to contribute to drastically improving the world by devoting one’s career to addressing the biggest problems of our time. For Wojciech, the Dean of Arts, his faculty should train morally ambitious students and develop research that contributes to supporting that aim as well.

The TLN makes use of translation in two main contexts: the rendering of written documents (stories from partners, financial documents, legal documents, etc.) and the provision of simultaneous oral translation during meetings. Written documents receive the most careful attention, as the asynchronous nature of this work allows time for deliberation and thoughtful decision-making. With legal and financial documents, for which the vocabulary needs to be domesticated, we rely on Google Translate to do most of the work and step in only to correct mistakes and make slight adjustments. When it comes to the stories of our partners, we engage more directly and deliberately to maintain the balance between foreignisation and domestication.

Each of our partners possesses a distinctive narrative voice that we strive to foreignise as much as possible in the translation process, as it reveals much about their origins, intended audiences, and understandings of how their struggles must be navigated – geographically, ideologically, and within existing structures of power. Perhaps the most crucial aspect of these narrative voices is how they relate to authority: how they claim authority over their own stories and how they engage with the authorities recognised within the systems of power they seek to challenge or transform.

Central to our project is the principle that everyone is an expert in and of their own experience, including expertise in narrating that experience. We believe that no one should make decisions on behalf of others, whether in natural resource management or in storytelling. When we co-author publications like this one or participate in conferences, we can make decisions collectively through horizontal democratic processes. Translation, however, presents a particular challenge. Since not all participants are fluent in both Spanish and English, collective decision-making becomes impossible, placing translators in the position of making decisions on behalf of others about how best to communicate their experiences in another language.

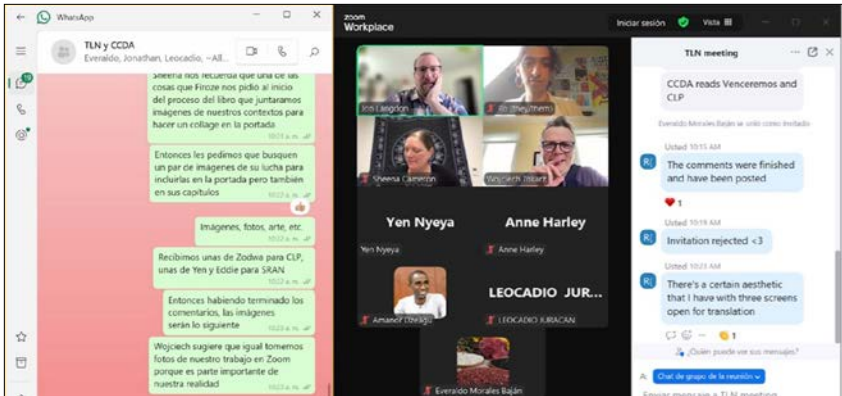
This raises a fundamental question for us as translators: How can we leverage our linguistic expertise to convey these stories effectively without overriding our partners' expertise in narrating their own lives? This question cannot – and must not – be definitively answered. Rather, it must remain an ongoing critical lens through which we continually evaluate our translation work. In our experience, navigating these tensions requires transparency and candor about our decision-making processes, deep sensitivity to the specific contexts of each partner, and, above all, trust cultivated through sustained relationship-building.

Simultaneous translation during meetings, however, is a different kind of monster. Within the TLN context, our goal has always been to create successful translations that extend beyond the mere conveyance of meaning: they must also mediate interactions to foster community, facilitate connection, and sustain communication that feels natural, thereby supporting productive and collegial engagement. The challenge of simultaneous translation is driven by the need to engage both meaningfully and quickly. Preserving the flow of conversations is key in this context because we cannot have effervescent exchanges of ideas if we need to interrupt participation every couple of seconds to translate. Consequently, speed became a critical priority in simultaneous interpretation. The technical complications related to this work affect the content of the translation as well. Using Zoom's subtitles was not an option because the

software is calibrated to speakers from the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, rendering it largely ineffective at recognising the Ghanaian and South African accents of our partners. This limitation led us to rely on Ro, whose capacity to understand and translate different accents in Spanish and English combined with a speed comparable to translation software at producing subtitles made them more suitable for the task. Wojciech worked as a backup for this system.

A critical consideration was determining the method by which Ro would deliver their translations during Zoom meetings. They discarded the Zoom chat function quickly because it only allows users to text either one person at a time or every participant in the meeting. This limitation was incompatible with our needs: we did not want to inundate all participants with translation messages, yet multiple members from CCDA required translation concurrently. Ro then proposed a solution: creating a WhatsApp group chat with the CCDA participants where Ro would translate from English to Spanish, and then do the translations from Spanish to English in the Zoom chat, visible to all participants. This created a demanding workflow for Ro, illustrated in the image on page 95, where they maintain three windows open on their screen at all times during meetings: one with the CCDA group chat (left), one with the video-call so that they could see the other people and shared content (middle), and the Zoom chat (right). Through this configuration whenever someone speaks in English, Ro is translating on WhatsApp, and when CCDA or Wojciech speak in Spanish, Ro is translating in the Zoom chat for the broader group.

The imperative for speed, combined with the complexity of the technical environment, significantly shapes the character and constraints of the simultaneous translation process. While Ro translates most content, certain elements are necessarily condensed or omitted through a process of domestication, which – particularly in Spanish – emerges as the more intuitive and efficient strategy under these demanding conditions. Wojciech intervenes sporadically, in either Spanish or English, providing reflections from his experiences, sharing his observations, and occasionally



Ro's three screens as they translate on meetings.

commenting on the translation process itself.

Ro's translation decisions, however, are informed by more than simply the demands of speed and the challenges of a complex interface. Our partners from CCDA are the newest members of the network, and, consequently, are not as integrated as the other members who have known each other for longer and even met in person. Additionally, partners from CCDA are the only participants who do not speak English, which limits their access to certain aspects of network engagement, especially the more casual interactions. At the beginning of meetings, while we wait for everyone to join, there is always about 10 minutes of casual conversation where everyone catches up on life and politics in their country; throughout these 10 minutes, it is a little harder for CCDA to participate because whatever they want to contribute in conversation requires Ro's mediation, precluding spontaneous interjections or humor. Additionally, their reactions to ongoing conversations are delayed by the seconds needed for translation and reading. This creates a certain awkwardness.

Yet these seemingly minor interactions are crucial for building solid relationships among network partners and fostering a genuine sense of belonging. Recognising this social dimension of communication, Ro deliberately domesticates much of what occurs during these exchanges, infusing the translation with warmth and familiarity. If CCDA members cannot participate fully in the

English-language sphere of the network, then perhaps they can experience enhanced intimacy within the Spanish-language space they inhabit. In concrete terms, this means that Ro employs slang and a more casual register when translating these interactions, even when the original English may have been more formal or neutral. In this way, translation functions as social glue – not merely as a vehicle for conveying meaning, but as an active mechanism for cultivating community among TLN members.

In the end, what emerges from this fast-paced, and uneven translation process is more than a transfer of words. Ro's work does not simply convey information, it cultivates belonging. Through domestication, through slang, through warmth, translation becomes an act of care, of inclusion, of network-making. It reminds us that communication is never neutral, and that language can be both a bridge and a site of negotiation. In the TLN, translation is at once technical and profoundly human: it carries the speed and pressures of digital collaboration, but it also carries laughter, recognition, and the subtle work of making people feel at home. In these small, deliberate choices, summarising, domesticating, adding warmth, translation becomes a quiet form of solidarity, holding together a network that spans languages, countries, and experiences. Translation helps cement the network as a space where the sharing of culturally and linguistically distinct experiences can inspire and empower all participants and the discourses they produce.

This understanding of translation as an act of care and solidarity is perhaps best articulated by one of the network's own participants, who reflected on translation and translators in the following terms:

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to Ro, whose work of translation from English to Spanish and Spanish to English, has carried so much more than words. Through this labor, Ro has opened pathways for connection, ensuring that the spirit of the Network can be felt across languages and geographies. In TLN, translation is not just communication, it is relationship, it is solidarity, it is care. Ro, your dedication affirms that our differences are not barriers but gifts that make our collective work richer and more alive.

I also hold deep appreciation for Wojciech, who has chosen to dedicate a chapter to this incredible shared journey. By making space for these stories, he affirms the strength and dignity of our struggles, and honours the values at the heart of TLN: mutual respect, horizontal engagement, and the weaving together of diverse perspectives. This act of recognition is itself a form of solidarity, reminding us that our voices, in all their variety, belong in the broader conversation about justice and transformation.

From Nosotros to Nosotres

As practices of domestication and foreignisation are negotiated within the translation processes of the TLN, it is equally important to recognise that translators themselves are not neutral agents in this work. As Mona Baker compellingly argues in her article *Translation as an Alternative Space for Political Action* (2013), a persistent yet often unchallenged assumption – particularly among non-specialist audiences – is that translators and interpreters function as impartial conduits. They are frequently imagined as disinterested facilitators who merely transfer meaning from one language to another, detached from the sociopolitical implications of the texts and contexts they mediate. This perception reduces translation to a mechanical task, stripped of ethical complexity or cultural consequence. Baker illustrates how translators and interpreters frequently operate in highly charged environments – such as conflict zones, activist movements, or contested public discourse – where they cannot, and often do not, remain neutral. Many translators hold strong convictions about the rights and wrongs of the events and struggles they encounter and are guided by ethical commitments that shape their linguistic and interpretive choices. In this light, translation emerges not simply as a technical act, but as a space for critical engagement and political agency. It becomes a means of participating in and shaping the discourses it transmits – an alternative space for action, resistance, and solidarity.

Within the context of the TLN, the act of translation does more than facilitate communication across languages – it opens

up a space for reimagining the very terms of dialogue itself. Translation within the network becomes a generative act, one that can challenge normative structures and amplify marginalised voices. As noted earlier, the decisions that inform how we balance domestication and foreignisation are often shaped by Ro's and Wojciech's own linguistic sensibilities and positionality. Rather than cataloging where we domesticate and where we foreignise, the more significant inquiry concerns how to understand these processes as politically meaningful within a translocal network designed with horizontality and a postcolonial ethic at its core. A notable example of this is Ro's deliberate choice – as co-author of this chapter, translator, and a genderqueer and transfeminine Mexican person – to employ gender-inclusive Spanish in all translations from English to Spanish. A practice that Wojciech and Spanish-speaking participants in the TLN are trying to adopt as well.

Standard Spanish, like many gendered languages, operates on a binary grammatical system that typically defaults to masculine forms as the “unmarked” or “universal” plural; we can refer to this form as the generic masculine. For example, *nosotros* (we, masculine or mixed-gender group) is conventionally used to refer to groups of men or mixed-gender assemblies, while *nosotras* (we, feminine) refers exclusively to groups of women. However, Ro defaults to *nosotres* – a non-standard, yet increasingly recognised, gender-neutral form. While not formally accepted by traditional grammatical authorities such as the Real Academia Española, *nosotres* and similar forms (e.g., *todes*, *amigues*) have gained traction within feminist, LGBTQIA+, and activist communities across Latin America and Spain.

The reasons behind this decision are plenty. Contrary to popular belief, the generic masculine form is not neutral, grammatically or politically, and in fact serves to construct and reinforce androcentric logics that sustain cisheteropatriarchy in Hispanic cultures. Masculinity is constructed as the norm, that which everyone is supposed to be, while femininity or an experience of gender beyond these two are thus constructed as deviant, exceptional even grammatically. It is a form of epistemic violence in that

it makes it impossible for gender nonconforming folks to produce, transfer, and preserve knowledge that would represent us and thus enable us to learn about who we are, find each other, build community, and resist our oppression. Gender-inclusive Spanish thus emerges as a counter discourse, that resists this androcentric logic and offers alternatives to the way in which Spanish constructs gender in the cultures that speak it (Avila Sánchez et al. 2023). It seeks to not only offer gender-neutral forms of speech, but to completely transform the role of gender in language by eliminating gendered vocabulary as much as possible or re-gendering it to subvert binary logics.

Furthermore, this approach to Spanish is of the utmost importance to the work of the network, as it is also a move towards the decolonization of language by way of subverting the gender binary that is, at least in the Latin American context, a colonial instrument. A substantial and rich body of scholarship examines the coloniality of gender and the gender binary (Lugones 2023), its connections to primitive accumulation in the origins of capitalism, and the exploitation of land and Black and feminised bodies (Federici 2004). We cannot talk about colonialism and land dispossession without talking about the colonization of Indigenous bodies through the imposition of the gender-binary. As you may have read already in the chapters of this book, all these forms of oppression are central to the struggles of our partners and the work of our network. Therefore, to use the very forms of language that construct and reinforce the systems of oppression we seek to eradicate would be not only completely politically incongruent, but actively interfere in our operations as a network.

For one to not use gender-inclusive Spanish would require the misgendering of gender nonconforming folks, which constitutes a form of anti-trans violence and would make the network an unsafe environment for them. Nobody wants that: we are working to build a network of politically engaged actors that share knowledge in non-hierarchical ways to help each other by cross-fertilising the learning journeys of our movements. A horizontal exchange of knowledge cannot happen when a member of the exchange is at an

epistemological disadvantage, that is, unable to access and communicate the knowledge they hold as well as produce new knowledge. Spanish in its binary-gendered form is responsible for the erasure of entire histories and knowledge systems beyond the binary that may yield powerful insights to the members of the network. Spanish-speaking participants seeking to interact with knowledge rooted beyond the gender binary would be unable to participate horizontally without the use of gender-inclusive Spanish, to the detriment of everyone in the network.

The use of inclusive Spanish in this context is not merely a linguistic adjustment, but a political and ethical intervention that centres relationality – an effort to create a discursive space that supports the TLN’s commitment to cross-cultural and cross-movement learning, decolonization, and horizontality. By choosing forms that resist the normative exclusions of the language, Ro emphasises that translation is not only about transmitting meaning but also about affirming identities and reshaping power dynamics within the communicative act itself. In this way, gender-inclusive Spanish serves as both a tool and a symbol of the TLN’s broader values: recognising difference, fostering solidarity, and cultivating a shared space that is attentive to the nuances of identity and voice amidst the multiple crises that we deal with in our work.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that our Spanish-speaking partners have thus far been receptive to Ro’s use of gender-inclusive Spanish in their translation work. Development studies scholars have often been hesitant to discuss queerness in the Global South, often fearing this may constitute an imposition of Northern liberal values (Jolly 2023; Mason 2018; Weerawardhana 2018). While our partners could certainly have interpreted Ro’s practice through this lens, several factors may have mitigated such a reading: Ro was born and raised in the Global South and, as a queer person, they have no choice but to bring queerness into their scholarship. In this context, the need for gender-inclusive Spanish may have appeared, to some degree, self-evident. Still, we would encourage other development studies scholars to make space for queerness in these nuanced ways, always remembering to center relationality.

The aim is not to queer for queering's sake, but rather to ensure that the relationships through which we share knowledge are in the best position they can be, ethically and politically.

Translation as infrastructure for radical solidarity

This chapter has explored translation within the Translocal Learning Network not as a peripheral technical concern, but as foundational infrastructure that shapes the very possibility of collaborative knowledge production across difference. Far from functioning as a neutral conduit for meaning, translation emerges here as a site where power is negotiated, identities are affirmed, and ethical commitments are enacted in practice.

The experiences documented throughout this chapter reveal that translation operates simultaneously on multiple registers: as a linguistic practice, a relationship-building mechanism, a political intervention, and an act of care. Through Ro's work – navigating the technical demands of simultaneous interpretation across three screens, employing gender-inclusive Spanish to challenge cisheteropatriarchal norms, and deliberately domesticating casual exchanges to foster warmth and belonging – we see how translation becomes a form of relational labour that exceeds the mere transfer of words. The deliberate choices made within the TLN's translation practices illuminate broader questions about how knowledge circulates in translocal spaces. When Ro and the rest of the participants choose *nosotres* over *nosotros*, this is not simply a grammatical decision but a political commitment to make visible what normative language renders invisible. When translation is slowed down to preserve narrative voice, or sped up to maintain conversational flow, or infused with slang to create intimacy, these are strategic interventions that recognise translation as a space where difference can be both honoured and bridged.

The TLN's approach offers an important counter-model to dominant practices that prioritise fluency, invisibility, and the domestication of difference in service of hegemonic norms. Instead, the network demonstrates that it is possible to engage in translation practices that refuse to erase alterity even as they work to build connection. This requires ongoing reflexivity, transparency

about decision-making processes, deep contextual knowledge, and above all, trust among network members.

The implications of this approach extend beyond the TLN itself. For Wojciech, as a scholar trained in the rigorous conventions of Modern Languages – where subjectivity in academic writing is typically discouraged and methodological orthodoxy carefully guarded – engaging with the TLN’s translation practices has required confronting disciplinary discomfort. The collaborative, improvisational, and politically committed approach to translation documented in this chapter initially seemed transgressive, even questionable by the standards of his disciplinary formation. Yet this very inner turmoil proved valuable, speaking to the challenges of breaking academic molds and revealing how genuinely subversive this work is. The research labor required to make space for himself in this context – bringing theoretical sources into conversation with lived practice, articulating reflections that bridge the personal and the scholarly – represents the kind of intellectual boundary-crossing that the humanities and social sciences increasingly require but often resist.

As an academic administrator, Wojciech now sees this model of translation – and the relationships it cultivates within the network – as offering vital inspiration for the academic mission of the humanities and social sciences. It not only provides new inter- and transdisciplinary opportunities but also challenges the restrictive boundaries of traditional disciplines. The TLN’s experience suggests an invitation to other academics who, upon their first encounter with such work, may instinctively respond with skepticism: “This is not research,” “This is not proper translation,” “This is not rigorous linguistic analysis.” By demonstrating how knowledge can circulate horizontally across linguistic and cultural difference, the TLN’s translation practices suggest possibilities for reimagining how academic institutions might foster more equitable, collaborative, and decolonial modes of knowledge production – modes that require scholars to challenge themselves and their disciplinary inheritances.

In an era of intensifying global interconnection alongside deepening inequalities, the question of how we communicate across lin-

guistic, cultural, and political divides has never been more urgent. As we move forward, both within the TLN and in other translocal initiatives, we must continue to ask: How can translation serve not as an instrument of assimilation, but as a tool for liberation? How can we honour the expertise of storytellers while responsibly mediating their words? How can we create communicative spaces that are both accessible and resistant to the flattening pressures of dominant linguistic norms? These questions, like the question of how to translate without overstepping narrative authority, cannot be definitively answered. They must remain open – guiding our practice, provoking our reflection, and reminding us that the work of translation, like the work of solidarity, is never finished.

Responses to Chapter 8 from other members of the Network

Radio Ada:

Reflecting on this chapter... Radio Ada has a language disability. If our engagement or our communication were to be in our mother tongue/language, our way of presentation would be more rich and would convey the actual meaning of what we want to share. Most times, we try our best. In the case of Noah, he was a very good writer but a poor speaker. But each time Leocadio is making a statement, one sees the power, the control, the zeal, the charisma behind the words, and it carries that weight – even if you don't understand the language. In some instances, one might think, we are all speaking English, he is not knowledgeable [because he doesn't speak English]; but the truth is, language does not classify whether one is knowledgeable or not. Once we are all sharing our lived experiences and thoughts, in our primary language, no matter how small one may choose to speak – once you are conveying the lived experiences and what is important to you – that is what is important.

We must all convey the important work that Ro is doing. Without this work, we might not have followed the work that CCDA is doing. Recently, Leocadio shared a strategy used to win a court case. They went from home to home to collect information

to buttress their point in court, and the evidence they presented was so powerful that the judge could not deny justice. In a similar situation, we have voice audio and stories from our communities to provide evidence. For courts in Ghana today, we need to present more than just one audio or story, we need to share what has been shared by more than just a community member. The courts may need to know how many community members are agitating and for what and what they think should be done. So beyond the audio, we should be able to provide some other evidence to support the communities, we should be able to send these cases to court to prove their place in the Songor Lagoon. To prove that 35,000 people in a year are able to win how many tonnes of salt, as against an individual investor who may claim to win 5 million tonnes per year. That evidence is not there. This may sway government and policy makers to think that an investor working in the lagoon may be better than a whole community benefitting from their ancestral resource. So as we think about moral justice, we should also think about how to support communities beyond advocacy; however, people are only thinking about legal justice. If not for this translation, I would not have caught this information from Leocadio. The commitment from Ro and Wojciech is so important to allow this.

Things we think others could learn from this chapter and our reflections on it:

1. The stories of different struggles can really help us in our own struggles, and help us to work together – we can learn so much from other struggles, and learn how much we have in common.
2. Language can get in the way. Having to tell our story in someone else's language might help them know about our story, our struggle; but it makes it harder for us to tell our stories. But it is also hard to know and learn from the story of another struggle, if it is told in a language we do not understand. This weakens our struggling together.
3. This is why it is so important for people to be able to tell the story of their own struggle in their own language; and so important to have people do the work of translating our stories into other languages.

CHAPTER 9

Learners in Practice Research Assistant Learning from Social Movement Struggles

Sheena Cameron and Ro Paradela

Introduction

As the Translocal Learning Network (TLN) grew from the roots of years of participatory action research (PAR) with the Ada Songor Social Movement in Ghana, so too did the work of research assistants that had been supporting the research and social movement partners from the beginning. The shift to a translocal social movement network that expanded the work to multiple partner struggles and contexts, in addition to the accompanying COVID-19 pandemic, brought both consistent and new learnings and challenges to the experience. This wealth of learnings and challenges over time was first documented in the spring of 2021, during two Zoom reflection sessions (22 and 24 March, 2021) with nine past and current research assistants. Further documentation of these learnings and challenges took place between 2024 and 2025 in preparation for this book chapter between the authors who, at the time of writing, were the research coordinator Sheena Cameron and undergraduate research assistant Ro Paradela. Sheena Cameron is a mother of two children, a part-time instructor of Development Studies at St. Francis Xavier University, and PhD Candidate in Social Justice Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto. She has been involved as a research assistant since 2012 (with the exception of 2015, 2017, and 2018) and as a research coordinator since 2019. Ro Paradela is a genderqueer transfeminist activist born and raised in Mexico

City and a recent graduate from St. Francis Xavier University with a Bachelor of Arts Honours in Sociology and Women's and Gender Studies. Ro has been involved as a research assistant since 2022.

Within the TLN, research assistants (RAs) perform tasks beyond the usual transcription, administrative, and documentation work that principal investigators (PIs) do not do. Following a model of participatory action research, we are actively engaged in the process of building and maintaining connections with partners, learning from them and the contexts of their social movements, online and, formerly, on site. Therefore, RA participation on the TLN culminates in more than just work experience: we develop a critical sense of what our place is as research assistants within the field of academic research, and a larger political consciousness about the place of academic researchers within social movements more broadly. To this end, we would like to share some integral insights into the inner-workings of the TLN, drawing on our own learnings and reflections as research assistants and the learnings of other former research assistants who have been involved over the last fourteen years.

This chapter explores key learnings and themes that have emerged from cross-cutting reflections as well as key challenges as research assistants within old and new contexts. This includes conversations between Sheena Cameron and Ro Paradela, accompanied by quotes from two previous conversations over Zoom between former research assistants that happened in March 2021. We have also included information from Dr. Jonathan Langdon (who we will henceforth refer to as Jon), the principal investigator, to provide historical context and research objectives within the overview relating to each of the key themes. We used this methodology and way of structuring the chapter because it is aligned with the method of learning that has been embraced by research assistants. This layered dialogical learning approach has brought reflective practice, relationship building, and critical analysis into intentional conversation spaces that have built on and moved our learning forward over the years.

A brief history of Research Assistant involvement in the TLN

The struggle for the Songor Salt Lagoon began decades ago, but Jon Langdon's engagement and participatory action research in Ghana with Radio Ada commenced in 2004 and continued throughout his doctoral research. In 2011, a successful three-year standard research grant (SRG) with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) enabled the hiring of research assistants to support the participatory action research work in social movement learning with Radio Ada and the Songor Salt Movement. In 2015, an Insight Grant with SSHRC expanded the study to include social movement learning within and between two movements in Ghana and their relationship with community radio. Again, this included research assistants to support the work. More SSHRC funding in 2017 with a Connection Grant expanded the work to amplify artistic and creative connections of the Songor story and then in 2019, funding to focus on sustainability and podcasting. The research focus was also expanded when Jon was awarded a Canada Research Chair (CRC) in Sustainability and Social Change Leadership with a focus on translocal learning. So in 2018, a group from Ghana with Radio Ada travelled to South Africa to connect with members of Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) and the Church Land Programme (CLP) and the following year, representatives from AbM and Dr. Anne Harley travelled to Ghana. The Translocal Learning Network (TLN) was born.

Over this time, research assistants have played an integral role in supporting and participating in the research. Beginning in 2011, with each iteration of funding, research assistants, undergraduate and graduate (Masters and PhD students), as well as funding for a research team in on-site locations, have always been part of the research design and implementation. Over these 15 years, there have been 28 research assistants who have participated, some over multiple years, and in different contexts (Northern and Southern Ghana, Mi'kma'ki, virtually with partners from Mi'kma'ki, South Africa, and Guatemala).

The roles of research assistants remained quite similar over the

first 10 years, with field-based placements, research documentation and support, meeting transcriptions, and literature reviews and analysis. There were minor adjustments during this time, with each grant proposal, including adding the roles of partner-based RAs in Ghana in the SSHRC Insight Grant. To this end, from 2011 to 2019, RAs interned for the summer with partner organisations in Ghana, learning first-hand about the movement issues and the way that partners were contributing to movement goals and learning, as well as providing research support. RAs were also integral to data collection and Masters level RAs were part of data collation, management, analyses, and process support.

As the expansion of partners began and continued, there was still a focus on field-based placements for research assistants. Undergraduate RAs were placed in each location in Northern (Gbane) and Southern Ghana (Ada), with the graduate RA moving between each location to provide support in data collection and collation, documentation and data management (of radio broadcasts, focus group discussions, field notes, radio listening group discussions), and providing mentorship support to undergraduate RAs. Throughout these years, RAs were integral for maintaining a physical presence with partner organisations, supporting data collection and documentation, and supporting partners and Jon. This was accomplished through active participation with the activities being undertaken, and handling the logistics necessary to ensure that the research was part of all movement processes. The roles changed quite a bit in the later translocal research, with the onset of COVID-19 and travel restrictions, in addition to the expansion of the network to include partners in Mi'kma'ki, South Africa and Guatemala. So from 2020 onward, the field-based placements did not happen, and all activities took place online, with the exception of annual meetings with Jon travelling to Ghana or South Africa.

Mentorship was written into the research design and funding proposal, particularly with Jon (as the principal investigator) providing mentorship to all research assistants by way of developing a reflective practice, troubleshooting challenges in the field, and ongoing support with research assistant responsibilities. Through

this research, RAs were able to witness first hand how collaborative research is negotiated, seeing the researcher and participant relationships, how to make potentially unequal relations responsive to the needs of all involved, as well as the ethical negotiations of relationships in the research and the RAs' own positionality. For the Masters and PhD level research assistants, there was an added level of mentorship built into the research design by providing additional opportunities to collaborate with the research facilitation and coordination, contribute to the analysis and member-checking process as well as coordinating and co-authoring writing publications and conference presentations, and support for the graduate student's own research. These supports and opportunities were ultimately not limited to the graduate RA and also extended to undergraduate research assistants. RAs were also encouraged to gather direct research for their own thesis research and gained experience from participating in intense research activities.

For some RAs the research, or an off spin project of the research, became the focus of their undergraduate honours thesis, post-grad fellowship project (i.e. Pathy Fellowship), or informed their graduate studies. Boye Matuluko, an RA from 2020 to 2021, explained, "I decided after the translocal learning that we did, I made my thesis to focus on how COVID-19 might have affected social movements and how [the] internet as a tool is being used to enhance communication while that is ongoing." (March 2021).

A level of the mentorship that was achieved within the first round of funding, although perhaps unanticipated, was for the graduate student research assistant to help mentor the undergraduate RAs. Subsequent funding proposals and research design identified this kind of mentorship from graduate RAs. Furthermore, local Ghanaians who were part of the research team as translators and research assistants, between 2011 and 2019, also gained meaningful mentorship from other research team members and built their skills in qualitative research as well as learning about their own history, identity and role in the movement. Ghanaian research assistants and team members also played an important role in mentoring their Canadian counterparts. One past Ghanaian RA,

Julius Odoi, expressed his own learnings that emerged through this experience.

I was also very much happy and excited that I have to learn from people from different cultural backgrounds, how they perceive how we do things and how they even appreciate the African ways of going about things and how they appreciate the social movements from the women. For me, one other thing has to do with the strength and the power that comes from these women, we've always thought that women will play second fiddle to social issues in our communities, but this research brought to light the fact that women, when they are able to mobilise themselves, they can achieve a lot. (*Julius Odoi, Ghanaian RA 2014-2020, 22 March 2021*).

Additionally, this mentorship and training extended to a form of political mentorship where RAs were supported and mentored to develop skills in terms of questioning structures of globalization, delving into issues through critical inquiry, and generating



Julius Odoi, Ghanaian RA 2014-2020 & Lisa Gunn, RA 2013.
Photo: Rachel Garbary



Julius Odoi, Ghanaian RA 2014-2020, in Radio Ada OnAir Booth, 2013.
Photo: Lisa Gunn

community dialogue on significant issues that contributed to movement learning and actions. RAs were also provided with training in collaborative teamwork and increased their cross-cultural learning through the research processes; all elements that were anticipated in the research design process. It was believed that all of these skills, knowledges, and forms of mentorship would benefit RAs in their future livelihoods and endeavors.

Throughout the years, RAs working closely in each context were intentionally included in all aspects of the research from start to finish. RAs contributed to discussions and ongoing co-design of the research process (what Choudry and Kapoor (2010) call movement situated research) as part of the collective research team, as well as having ongoing weekly meetings and checkins and post-activity debriefs with RAs and Jon. RAs were also acknowledged as crucial actors in generating dialogue between movement contexts. Involvement in this type of collaborative and participatory research was recognised as an important training ground for RAs and as such all RAs were provided with the basics of qualitative and participatory research. To this end, RAs were trained

in conducting, recording, and transcribing research and reflective meetings. This became easier when meetings were moved online over Zoom as we undertook video and audio recording, used closed captioning transcriptions, and took meeting notes, to which were collaboratively compiled, over Google docs.

As the research expanded into the Translocal Learning Network and to include partners in South Africa (2018 to present), Mi'kmaki (2019-2021), and then in later years Guatemala (2023 to present), as well as with the onset of COVID-19 (2020-23), RA responsibilities moved online. Even after the end of the pandemic, the TLN continued to meet online due to added travel complications. With more partners in more places, it became hard to even decide where to meet, more complicated and expensive to coordinate travel arrangements, and the rise of new personal and political complications to travel (young children, anti-LGBTQIA+ laws in partner contexts, visa challenges). However, RAs continued to perform similar roles: they were assigned partners to support and develop a closer relationship with, just no longer on the field.

Despite the lack of physical presence and the deeper personal relationships that came with being in the field with research partners, the use of Zoom as an online platform, in addition to using Whatsapp and email for effective messaging and then the Translocal Learning Platform, the move to our online meeting space has many benefits and advantages. It was less expensive, allowed for more accessibility for all of our busy lives, created more regular meetings and communication, and enabled many of us who would not have been able to participate physically or to travel, to have access virtually. Natalie Krieger (RA 2017-2021), referring to using online platforms explained, “it just makes more conversations really accessible” (24 March 2021). Natalie was involved as an RA beginning in 2017 in Ghana and during the transition to the TLN and to working online and reflects on the various activities, strategies and different forms of activism, interaction, and relationship building that have occurred throughout this shift.

From my first year, I vividly remember the Media Coalition Against Galamsey gathering that happened [in Ghana],



Lisa Gunn, RA 2013 in front of Radio Ada sign wearing CFXU sweatshirt.
Photo: Rachel Garbary

research activities, conversations and dancing, songs about illegal mining and destruction around Ghana. In my second year, we had a couple of colleagues come from Abahlali – the Shack Dwellers movement in South Africa. So they joined us for two weeks or a week and a half for our workshop, which was really awesome because it was really good to see how the movement was able to share the stories of each other and as the years have gone on. This year, we had our COVID conversations online and it's always awesome to see people reconnecting on an online space, which lots of us have been more involved with. *(Natalie Krieger, 24 March 2021)*

We also put more emphasis into using podcasting and the Social Justice Radio program to share the stories of partners, providing training in podcasting and digital storytelling. RAs were also trained in podcasting development and took the lead in supporting partners with producing digital stories. Social Justice Radio had originally been created as a Call and Response Partnership show with Radio Ada in 2011 that aired on CFXU The Fox 93.3FM at St. Francis Xavier University (STFX). Through this program,

RAs developed a couple radio shows a year in partnership with colleagues at Radio Ada to produce a show that highlighted one issue but from two different contexts (i.e. climate change, women's rights, etc. in Antigonish and in Ada, Ghana). In 2013, the program shifted, under the direction of an RA (Rachel Garbary) to become Social Justice Radio, a weekly radio show that covered local issues of social justice at STFX campus and the Antigonish community as well as the partnership shows with Radio Ada.

Over the years, many RAs have contributed regularly to the weekly radio show outside of the research as well as supporting partners to create shows about their struggles. This program and this medium has become an effective way for RAs to create advocacy about the many social justice issues in their own communities, particularly Mi'kmak'i, that they feel passionate about. This program has also elevated the voices of the partners we work with in Ghana and now, in South Africa and in Guatemala.

Sheena shares,

The use of communicative discourse through community radio and through podcasting with Social Justice Radio to share stories has been important. However, it is also the approach of storytelling, handing over the mic, creating these platforms for those on the front line to share their own lived experiences as experts in their own lives to legitimise their knowledge that is integral. Moreover, creating trainings for partners to learn how to do that themselves, enable alternative or counter narratives to confront dominant narratives, and build community and relationships through the process. (*Sheena, 2025*)

Ro feels they have learned how to think about and tell a good story through their work with Social Justice Radio. They explain,

I think part of it is just connecting with people on the ground, handing the mic to people who have local knowledge on things. I feel I get a lot of inspiration from that from Radio Ada. To me, they're the reference for that. Whenever I go somewhere new, I look out for community



Ro Paradela, RA 2022–2025, at the CFXU radio booth on their last day airing an episode for Social Justice Radio before graduating. Photo taken at StFX, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada. Photo: Ro Paradela

radio stations and try to just see what they're doing because I have come to understand how valuable they are. I don't know that I will go on to create podcasts of any sort, but I do think that I will go on to tell stories in a similar way and that is definitely a transferable skill that I learned from that exercise. (*Ro, 2025*)

A TLN research assistant's key lessons

The lessons that follow outline key learnings that emerged from two conversations between Sheena Cameron and Ro Paradela about our experiences as research assistants, in spring 2025. Additionally, we have included relevant quotes from former Research Assistants from the Zoom conversations in March 2021 that illustrate and align with these key lessons. These broadly cover four themes. First, academic lessons: what have we learned about research approaches and design that is grounded in community? What have we learned about the environment of academic work, the relationships entailed, and so on? Second, political lessons: how has this work influenced our politics and our approach to political work and grassroots organising? Third, relational lessons: what have we learned from working translocally? From aspiring

to horizontality in the research process? From walking the talk of postcolonial politics? Finally, network lessons: what the network might have learned and could still learn from us?

Academic lessons: reconciling research and community

Sheena first reflects on how truly groundbreaking this research framework was when she started working with Jon. She remembers they received a lot of pushback from other academics who did not understand or plainly rejected that it could be effectively implemented, especially considering the challenges it might face within funding schemes, since it goes against more traditional – extractive, colonial – research models. It was difficult for research partners themselves to grasp how this worked: they appreciated being given the space and power to make decisions, but had to work through understanding what this meant for their relationship with Jon as a professor.

Ro started working in the network early in their undergrad, when their relationship to more traditional research models had been through their courses, so being exposed to this research model from early on has been really formative for them. They are very critical of the more traditional approaches to research and feel a general aversion to them. Ro agrees that this kind of research has been hard to grasp and feels grateful that it was their first experience in academic work because that way, they don't have to do as much unlearning of the more traditional ways. They share that at the beginning, they had a conversation with Jon and Wojciech in which they said they felt like they were scamming the university to get paid to do research that does not feel like research; they no longer think this is the case, and have learned to reframe what "research" means.

Their experience working as a research assistant has been very influential in the development of their personal approach to academic work. For instance, the constant reflective practice encouraged by Jon is something they carried into their thesis by keeping a very detailed research journal. Other influences include a heavy prioritization of relationality and a constant interrogation of power imbalances within research contexts.

The encouragement from Jon to develop a reflective practice through the work and learning process as research assistants is integral. Even being reflective about the research process itself and challenging colonial and oppressive forms of research. In earlier years, many research assistants were also taking the Development Studies internship course with Jon, for which they undertook reflective journaling as part of the course assignments of the summer term. These reflections would be followed by meetings to unpack and deepen their learnings. So it was a really intentional process of action, reflection, and learning in every aspect of their experience. Stephanie MacKinnon, a RA in 2012, explained,

Jon's consistent reminder to reflect on everything and never stop learning for how you are thinking about things stuck with me. One of the things I always ask myself, I can still hear Kofi's [a long-term partner from Radio Ada in Ghana] voice and him saying "I do not envy you" when we were doing all of our transcriptions but reminding us that, there is power in listening to the silences and how people actually interact with each other. (*Stephanie MacKinnon, RA in 2012, 22 March 2021*)

The reflective journaling extended beyond the academic experiences in their internships; it extended to experiences in the community, with their host families, and their identities and positionalities as research assistants within these communities. Sheena believes that we are still encouraged to develop a reflective practice but feels that some of this structural learning has been lost because it is no longer deeply intertwined with the development studies course.

As research assistants, we also learned about working with a research ethic that regards researchers, not as distant observers or expert leaders within social movements, but as participants in supporting roles. Ro, for instance, has come to understand that researchers can use our time, skills, and resources to build archives and schedules, provide reflecting opportunities, and perform other administrative tasks that might not be possible or a huge priority to those rushing on the front lines. This research ethic challenges



Meetings in community with Radio Ada and members of the Ada Songor Advocacy Forum (ASAF) for the participatory action research, Aunty Becky, Aunty Emily and Lisa Gunn with women, 2013.
Photo: Rachel Garbary)

traditional hierarchies within research and gets researchers to work more horizontally with their participants. This is a lesson that other research assistants have also taken:

I think a few of the biggest things I took away from that experience was the importance and value of working at the grassroots level. (*Leah Jackson, RA 2012, 22 March 2021*)

Radio Ada was really influential actually in how I think about research. Particularly the participatory programming frameworks within community radio and going to people directly, getting first hand experiences and working from there, I think influenced me a lot more than I realised at the time. (*Sarah McLeod, RA 2017, 24 March 2021*)

Sheena adds that another important element that has shaped the approach to the research has been the process of mentorship; from Jon as well as other partners and research assistants, really embodying the notion of ‘it takes a village.’ She acknowledges Jon’s important role, as well as her own, in supporting research assistants while they were physically in community, navigating the development of relationships with partners and encouraging RAs to create their own relationships with partners and communities. This continues today, in a different way, through online meeting spaces and with an expansion of partners. This relationship building and mentorship, modelled by Jon, demonstrates the role academics must have at the forefront of pushing back on ideas of who is an expert, whose knowledge counts, or whose knowledge is legitimate. It also emphasises the importance of relationships within research.

This approach, Sheena believes, is grounded first in understanding the importance of community driving this work, that the partners that we’re working with have an equal partnership here and that there’s a horizontal process of decision-making and dialogue. The research strives to be non-hierarchical, yet recognises that there are still power imbalances between researcher, research assistants, and partners, that we need to continue to name and try to address. This is both for the approach to the research but also for the approach to mentorship. Sheena recognises the impact this approach has had on her and tries to use this model in her work. Many other former research assistants also voiced the ways they have been impacted by this.

One of the big takeaways from me [is] how important it is for people on the ground to address these issues and have conversations inside the movement. (*Karen Nembhard, RA in 207, 24 March 2021*)

This left a long legacy, just an impression of what real collaborative community work looks like. (*Stephanie MacKinnon, RA in 2012, 22 March 2021*)

The meetings really shaped how I think about dialogue, cross-culturally and also any form of dialogue (*Sarah McLeod, RA 2017-2018, 24 March 2021*)



Community meeting in open air meeting space at Radio Ada, 2013.
Photo: Lisa Gunn

Political lessons: Mentorship on the politics and practice of organising and research

Interactions with partners are constantly educational for research assistants. Former RA, Lisa Gunn, for instance, reflected:

I often feel my time as a research assistant serves as a foundation on which everything that I have done since has been built. For me that experience has been formative in terms of my thinking of my position within social movements. The way I approach international development work, as I have followed it as an actual career so far at least. Yeah it's really understanding, finding where I can support and how I can support effectively, understanding my positionality as a White settler, a White woman in Canada, or in Ghana or someplace else. (*Lisa Gunn, RA 2013, 24 March 2021*)

Sheena concurs with these important learnings of transferring that knowledge to other spaces, whether connected to this work or in other parts of our lives, networks, teaching, research, or community, demonstrates the ripple effect of this work. Former RA



Popular adult education about the history and cultural significance of the Songor Lagoon using art tapestry developed by ASAF members and local artist at Radio Ada, 2013. Photo: Lisa Gunn

Stephanie MacKinnon agrees, explaining that being involved with the research has had “a huge impact on who I am today and the type of work I value, and what I pursue and how I think about things, and how I unlearn things.” (*Stephanie MacKinnon, RA in 2012, 22 March 2021*). Leah Jackson, who was also an RA in 2012, explained how her involvement and learning within the research altered her pathway in community development. “I think it kind of shifted my interest in the work I was doing from that kind of international, the higher systems level to much more local community based grassroots change from the ground up as the biggest and best way to make impact.” (*Leah Jackson, RA in 2012, 22 March 2021*).

Past research assistants have reflected on the impact that this research has had on them and how it has informed their values, their learnings, the way they are involved in community and activism, and the paths they have taken. Sarah McLeod, a RA in 2016 and 2017: “Having this experience in Ghana shaped who I am and also my interest, how I connect to people, how I see the



Sarah McLeod (RA 2016 & 2017) and Kristen McAdams (RA 2016), at Radio Ada, proudly display published book, *The Struggle of the Songor Salt People*, written collectively by members of the Ada Songor Advocacy Forum, including research assistants from 2012-2016

world.” (24 March 2021). Sarah continues, “I feel like it was really a transforming time for me, shaping who I am and my values, questioning things.” (*Sarah McLeod, RA 2016/17, 24 March 2021*).

One past RA from 2012, Leah Jackson, shares a memory of a significant moment in her experience:

I think a big piece of learning for me was what my role in development work was. I remember when we were at the festival at the beginning of August, the Asafotuam, and there had been a protest organised by the women’s group. They were dressed beautifully in their red clothes, they had painted signs resisting what was happening at the Songor, I felt so proud of the courage and power they showed in that act of resistance. They were about halfway around the field when someone put a stop to their demonstration. I saw their hand-painted signs tossed aside in a pile beneath a canvas depicting the history of the Songor, and I felt so frustrated by the irony of the visual. History was repeating itself as these women were silenced in their fight to defend communal access to a vital cultural and economic resource. I wanted more than anything to pick up one of the signs



Auntcy Erica and family with Stephanie MacKinnon and Leah Jackson who were host families for RAs, 2012. Photo credit unknown, provided by Leah Jackson

and continue the protest, feeling my own sense of courage. I remember I stretched my hand out to reach for it and I was told, “This isn’t your role in this. It is the person who is most affected that has to stand up there by the signs.” That stuck with me for a while. I struggled with it, I wondered where my place was, and how I was supposed to make a difference. I was there to learn and in a support role as a student researcher. But I wanted it to be more, and that was hard because I cared so much. The experience made me realise I was more comfortable working in my own community, where I can pick up a sign when it’s needed without worrying about a White saviour complex, where I am most affected because it’s my community. It’s interesting because this experience has come into my mind at different times over the years, and I ask myself, am I the



Women's group advocacy at Asafotufiam Festival, Ada 2013.

Photo: Lisa Gunn

one to hold the sign? Is it someone else? What is my role here, am I a leader, a watcher, or part of the group showing solidarity? I think that was one of my biggest takes from my experience, always really being conscious of what the group needs, what's appropriate in that specific context, and how I can fill that need in the best way possible based on the skills I have and based on the skills of other people in the group. (*Leah Jackson, RA 2012, 22 March 2021*)

Sheena also believes that a big learning through political mentorship is recognising that partners are dealing with multiple crises or threats simultaneously, or are attending to various happenings in their lives or their movements. To which, RAs try to support partners in whatever ways make it easier for their participation. Oftentimes, providing this support requires working with power dynamics that remain unaddressed within what aspires to be a fully horizontal work-space. Therefore, there are different dynamics between different partners when it comes to having conversations and also when it comes to them leaning on RAs. Elements of power are also at play, where partners may feel that there is more weight

or have a quicker response to requests or involvement from Jon, than from RAs.

Tensions and affinities arise within these hierarchies and learning how to navigate them is part of the job as an RA. For instance, Everaldo is a subordinate of Leocadio, just like as RAs we are subordinates of Jon as the primary investigator, and we do a lot of the work required by the network's activities. In this sense, Ro has a certain camaraderie with Everaldo, for instance, because in the hierarchies of the work they do they stand on a similar level; they work *with* each other, but *for* Jon and Leocadio, who occupy a higher position within their respective workplace dynamics and the network.

Sheena agrees and also feels it depends on the partner as well as on our identities. Providing the example of how Sheena feels she has been able to relate to and build a relationship with Zodwa. Sheena emphasises that this did not happen immediately or just because they are both women. But over time they have been able to build a relationship based on shared and differing experiences as women and mothers, in a way that the same kind of connection with others in the network may not exist.

For a long time Sheena struggled with the contradiction between the network philosophy of horizontal or non-hierarchical relationships and the reality of the ongoing challenges of achieving this. She has been able to reconcile the different cultural and social dynamics at play, while recognising the way our identity shapes how we are perceived or how we operate or connect with people. She acknowledges that the network is still a male-dominated space, which impacts her role and participation as a woman, and she continues to push for more women to be involved while also recognising the hard realities of women being involved in this work. Based on her own experience, Sheena offers that men within the network must continue to develop their critical consciousness to challenge how patriarchal values and sexism can create unwelcome or exclusionary spaces for women or people of other genders to be involved. There is still much work to be done to create spaces of inclusivity and diversity.

The case of Ro's identity in the power dynamics at play is more complicated. While they are a transfeminine and non-binary person, they have a sense that they are mostly read as a man by most members of the network. This is a complex problem: the unrecognition of their identity and the misgendering that comes with it puts an emotional toll on them as they cope with what are effectively, though perhaps not intentionally, constant transphobic micro-aggressions in the workplace; however, being read as a man still gives them some access to male privilege in some situations. It's additionally frustrating that they are not closeted at all: they are open about their militance in trans movements, introduce themselves with their pronouns to everyone, wear gender-affirming clothes and makeup most of the time, and still their identity is not recognised by most partners.

Prior to the trip to South Africa, Ro's approach had been to not correct anyone when they were misgendered, keep to themselves, and focus on the genuine camaraderie in the network, regardless of the gendered language used to express it. Ro appreciates being seen as a "brother" to the Ghanaian folks, for instance, even though they're more of a sibling or a sister. This approach came from a fear of complexity, shared widely in the field of Development Studies (Jolly 2023; Mason 2018; Weerawardhana 2018). Queer politics are delicate in the postcolonial African context. Political movements in African nations like Ghana and Uganda have cast queerness as a neocolonial imposition from the Global North that clashes with their perception of their pre-colonial nations as traditionally cisheteronormative and a threat to "good traditional African families." There is some truth to this: queer politics can reinforce coloniality and often do through homonationalist movements or pinkwashing campaigns. However, it is also true that queer folks have existed always and everywhere in one way or another, including precolonial African communities, and there is a postcolonial way to think about queerness. These conversations have to be rooted in the history of their contexts, with discourses aligned with local knowledges of gender, sex, and sexuality. Ro felt like they did not have the resources to have a conversation about queerness with

the necessary complexity, so they just didn't. During the trip to Johannesburg, things changed.

Ro organised a meeting at a local queer archive to talk about the importance of queering Indigenous land and livelihood movements in Africa and beyond. The meeting exceeded everyone's expectations. They were worried that the talk at the archive might be received as preachy or condescending; that because they are not the PI and just another research assistant, they might not be taken seriously; that some partners would have a previously undisclosed rejection to queer people which would cause conflict; that folks would be too intimidated by the topic and just not participate. None of this was the case. The partners were open and enthusiastic to talk about queerness in their movements and communities and to learn what queer liberation movements could bring into their struggles. A valuable lesson was learned here: that we don't need to rely on hierarchy or authority or power to bring equity into our movements because diversity is never an imposition, but a fact of collective organisation and it can be discussed horizontally as such. Jon didn't have to intervene. Nobody had to be silenced or told off. When the conversation and the environment in which it takes place are planned with sensibility, compassion, and consideration, conversations go right. This would not have worked if Ro had made slides and lectured equity, diversity, inclusivity and accessibility (EDIA), or if White queer Africans had led the conversation. It needed to be a peer-led and peer-informed conversation rooted in context, based on stories that matter and not just theory.

At the moment, Ro continues to be misgendered, but they also have not actively taught the partners how to correctly refer to themselves or what the pronouns on the Zoom screen mean. However, conversations have been had as a network about making time and space for that, and for Ro to share more about their struggle as a transfeminist activist, which is very encouraging. Still, a lot of work remains to be done in terms of EDIA within the network.

This is not an issue that exists exclusively within the network. Both Ro and Sheena agree that at times, progressive, social justice advocates can have blinders on, or draw a line within their activist

beliefs, whereby their politics of support do not extend to certain issues or oppressions. For example, partners may push for anti-colonial extractivism, but they may not go as far as supporting the LGBTQIA+ community who are being targeted. Moreover, when an injustice in the Queer community happens and some are not speaking up against that, but they would have spoken up if it was another situation, it can feel hard to digest what seems hypocritical. Through these experiences, Sheena explains how you see the complexity of people, that complex personhood as described by Eve Tuck (2009), which is always evolving. Just as RAs are also complex people who are also always evolving. Sheena provides the example of the changes to her capacity and participation within the network that have occurred as a result of becoming a mother and the need to shift priorities and set boundaries. From these new experiences, Sheena has gained new perspectives regarding women's involvement while also acknowledging her own privilege.

Ro adds that work in terms of EDIA is necessary, not just for the sake of it, but because diversity actively brings richness into the network and, in order to harness the valuable knowledge that comes with it, we need to take active steps into making the network a safe, encouraging, and accessible environment. This is especially important for RAs, whose subordination in research environments is often tied to our identities: it's not a coincidence that PIs and movement leaders tend to be older cishet White men and RAs are younger folks from various minoritised groups.

The work performed by folks with a variety of embodied experiences needs to be recognised for what it is and accommodated. For instance, an axis of our work that is never discussed regards disabled knowledges about rest, compassion, and mental health. The work of the network is inspiring, but exists in contexts of overwhelming horrors. We carry so much trauma, so much grief, and the body takes the toll. Ro and Sheena have talked about their depression and anxiety with each other and sometimes Jon has spoken about his mental state. But what about the partners? Are we making space for them to connect over their emotional needs? Is the network a safe space for folks to say "sorry, I'll be missing

the meeting today because the world is too heavy”? How do we make space for healing and rest, and not just work? As research assistants, we wonder about these things. Ro posits that an ethic of care needs to be braided into the work ethic under which we operate. The postcolonial ethic is covered, we need to work on EDIA ethics, and perhaps bringing in an ethic of care would make the space more well-rounded. An ethic in which we find more ways to care for each other as we exchange knowledges.

Sheena reiterates the need to keep pushing the network to grow in these areas, particularly recognising that people are coming to this work with various kinds of awareness about how coloniality has impacted their lenses and their perspectives, and so people’s analysis around these issues, are also going to be colored with their own subjectivities, their own identities, their own experiences, and we must all strive to to push each other to expand our perspectives. For example, sometimes religious beliefs prevent people from seeing how colonialism or patriarchy impact our treatment of or belief in women as equal, of different sexualities or genders, or even the value of labour, at times invisible labour, that people are doing. Sheena believes that this is being addressed but that it can go further.

Despite all that has been discussed as places for improvement, the respect for the work that partners are doing must be acknowledged. There are people who have had to leave this work as a matter of survival, because of threats to their lives, or for financial or family reasons. There are ebbs and flows and changes to people’s involvement, it is just the nature of this work. Yet, so many people have shown their deep strength, resiliency, and commitment to this work over the years, despite major personal and financial sacrifices that they have endured, and this must be acknowledged.

Relational lessons: the dynamics of research relationships

Kofi Larweh, who was previously involved in the research, said, “relationships are the work.” To this point, it was about recognising how the building of these relationships was important, if not more, important than the movement objectives and actions themselves.

And it was the building of and being in relationship with people from across these different contexts, that was about showing how we need to do this work together, even if we're not coming from the same place, even if we're outsiders. This approach continues today, when new people join the research, prioritising taking the time for building relationships, familiarity and rapport with partners. With the shift to virtual interactions and the expansion of network partners, each RA has been connected with one context/partner and is responsible for supporting them, in an effort to develop a deeper relationship and understanding of the struggle with them.

Being engaged and being part of [this], you can't do anything without being in a relationship or having a connection with the people of the movement. That is the biggest thing when I look back. The understanding of you can only do this by having relationships built. So that has been the biggest takeaway. (*Lisa Gunn, RA 2013, 24 March 2021*)

There are many different types of relationships; with partners, between partners, within the research team, and with Jon as the principal investigator. RAs must navigate and find their place within all of these relationship and power dynamics, while also doing the research. Furthermore, RAs must learn the different ways that each partner engages in the work, how they operate, and how to support them as a way of building layered relationality. Earlier, when RAs were physically present in Ghana, an important role they played was having a presence with partners and building relationships through living, working, and sharing space together. RAs learned about the different roles people played and became close to people. Being on the ground and experiencing the culture and dynamics helped RAs understand the work, the movement and the struggle more. It was a very personal, vulnerable, intense, and important experience.

Even though different, online relationships can also be very rich. Translating for CCDA, Ro has learned to value even the smallest of details in our interactions. It's important to participate, not just on the main discussion of the meeting, but on the watercooler talk

before. Updates on local politics, banter, sibling-like dynamics, the long-time friendships, seeing each other's kids on the background of the call; all of this is important and needs to be translated so that CCDA can participate and feel as connected as possible. The response to these efforts is positive: one of our partners from Guatemala has very young kids and he's always posting them on his WhatsApp status, so whenever someone else's kids are mentioned or show up on the screen, he sends happy or heart emojis to try to bond over having and living children. This kind of relationship building is also the work.

These interactions are richer in person, but Sheena believes that as it currently exists this kind of work could only be done primarily virtually. Even if COVID-19 had not happened, the work would not have been sustainable without shifting to virtual interactions. Moreover, there are so many benefits to the virtual network interaction, by humanising partners through getting glimpses into people's lives and contexts. People are able to see the lives that we are living which deepens and opens up relationships in a different way.

Finally, important relational lessons emerge from the relationships between research assistants. Having spaces for discussing issues, building camaraderie or even sharing experiences with others on the research team builds unique activist relationships. For example, Sheena shares that working with Ro has helped her recognise the importance of being valued, and the importance of setting boundaries. Ro has also helped Sheena to remember that activism crises do not only happen in Ghana, South Africa, and Guatemala. They happen in rural Canada as well and our experiences are valid and deserve to be shared with the network. Past RA Natalie Krieger agrees: "Just being able to pass through things with other research assistants and not by myself thinking about things and wishing to talk to somebody about them." (*Natalie Krieger, RA 2017-2021, 24 March 2021*).

Ro has also come to value their conversations with Sheena, learning so much about the importance of asserting oneself in the workplace, being critical of the stories that workplaces tell about

themselves, and how powerful it can be to build those relationships with everyone in the network. Ro also thinks back to how they could not find their place within the network at the beginning and talking to a former research assistant helped. She said: “well, I’m just a White bitch in Canada. Why would these activists want my help?” which really got Ro into thinking about how challenging it can be sometimes to navigate the postcolonial ethic of the network. This former research assistant never found the answer to her question and ultimately left. Ro kept working on it and has managed to find their place in the network because of it.

Part of the confusion comes from how each member of the network understands the role of the research in their lives. Sheena points out that although the research is clearly significant, important, and beneficial to partners, it holds different levels of priority among the research team members and the partners. It is important to remember that partners are managing many issues and that there must be space for conversations and reflective practice within the research team about managing expectations. She explains that her relationship to the research is different and builds on the work that she was already doing with her Masters in Communication and Social Justice as well as her prior work with communities in Ghana. Sheena believes that aside from the research connecting with this background and her personal values, it was also a way to deepen her relationship with the work in Ghana, particularly within activism, social movement learning, struggles and extracivism. Even after completing her Masters, Sheena continued to feel pulled to the work and found ways to be involved to support students and research assistants and to develop programs connected to the research through maintaining that connection of being in relationship with struggles that were happening in Ghana, in community development, community radio, and activism. Sheena continued to maintain relationships with different partners over time, and although she was no longer a research assistant, she provided support to other research assistants that came along with the interview process and leading orientations and debriefs.

These connections for Sheena extended beyond the research

work to the personal, as she returned to live and make a life with her family in Ada. To this end, many of the people she had developed relationships with through the research evolved into friendships who attended and helped to organise milestone events in her life such as her wedding and the naming ceremony of her first child. So these relationships extended beyond the research making them part of her life in a different way, realising that these relationships are lifelong commitments.

Sheena also expresses the tension of supporting people through their struggles while living in Canada, external to all of these challenges, because of the relationships of solidarity that hold that all liberations are bound together while also likely obliging a sense of Western guilt.

This was Ro's first job so it has been a very formative experience for them. They describe it through the metaphor of a blood family: they were born here (professionally), learned a lot about who they are, what they want to do, what they want their place in the world to be, but ultimately feel the need to eventually leave the nest and move onto other projects that feel more like their own. This doesn't mean abandoning the network though: there's solidarity here, so much more to learn and explore, so they would love to stay in contact and continue articulating things together, though at more of a distance.

Sheena agrees with the deep personal, emotional, and formative nature of relationships. Deep bonds are created through this research, with partners, with other research assistants, even with Ghanaian research assistants, doing translation, organising, and supporting the research in different ways on the ground. The nature of how these relationships are formed lend to the intimate and vulnerable yet intentional connections within the research. Yet, some relationships end prematurely or without resolution.

When Noah died, we all felt it so deeply. We saw him regularly, worked with him, got to see how important he was in his community and to the people around him. When Day of the Dead came around, a sacred festivity for Ro in their Mexican identity, we included Noah in the altar as part of mourning him. His death con-

tinues to make waves in all of us. Sheena believes that it is important to recognise that relationships are not static but dynamic. They change and have a natural and, at times, an unnatural process of people moving in and out of the network. The loss is felt deeply due to personal connections and the depth of the relationships. Relationships are developed through struggles and then life happens and people go in different directions.

Network lessons: partners learning from research assistants

Ro thinks that the main thing they've been able to contribute to the network is through translation and queer politics involved in it. They made an intentional effort in making translation accessible, inclusive, and aligned with the ideals of the network (you can read more about that in Chapter 8). Though not perfectly, our partners from CCDA and Wojciech have started using gender-inclusive Spanish and showing that they understand the importance of it.

After the trip to South Africa, the extent of Ro's contributions became more clear. There was a before and after the visit to the GALA Archive in Johannesburg. Partners came to understand how important and how possible it is to include queer folks within the scope of the populations they seek to come into contact with. They learned about the commonality of the struggles between trans people in Mexico and Black and Indigenous people in their own contexts. This has been invaluable and the full effects remain to be seen.

Sheena believes that RAs confront the idea that they have no knowledge to contribute; recognising instead the value of what RAs bring. For example, Ro contributes their astute analysis, personal experience and incredible translation skills. Additionally, Sheena contributes her background work in Ghana, long-term understandings of struggles in Guatemala and understandings of solidarity learned through work with Breaking the Silence. This knowledge and experience informs the roles we play and the way we approach the work of the network. The contributions of RAs have always been recognised, particularly how they support the work of the network, however, more recently RAs are acknowledged as import-

ant contributors of knowledge and experience and an essential part of the network.

Concluding thoughts

Research assistants are the backbone of the academic world. Without our labour, our observations, and our insights, even the biggest stars of academia would not shine as bright. Still, the voices of research assistants are seldom published. We hope that this chapter helps elucidate the importance of not only listening to and valuing the perspectives of research assistants, but of involving us more integrally in the decision making processes of research.

Research assistants are essentially learners in practice. We do what we do because we seek to learn from the projects of researchers larger than us and grow from these experiences. Our learning process informs the learning processes of the researchers we assist, and in turn the learning processes of academic institutions and all those who benefit from our labour. Things we do as research assistants like asking basic questions about methods and ethics, learning about the relational politics of the academic workplace, figuring out how our identity shapes our positionality, these are all things that no researcher should ever stop doing, a humility they must never forget.

By integrating research assistants so centrally into its operation, the TLN embraces the role of also becoming a learner in practice. Ro thinks that this may be the answer to our former peer's question "I'm just a White bitch in Canada, why would these activists want my help?" Perhaps as a Canadian research team, we must become one big research assistant to the movements in our network, recognising that we all have something to learn and contribute along this journey.

Responses to Chapter 9 from other members of the Network

Thank you, Sheena and Ro, for sharing your reflections in such an open, conversational way. Reading your words felt like being part of a dialogue, full of honesty, pauses, and the kind of back-and-forth that makes us stop and think. The issues you raise are not just

personal observations; they touch all of us. They ask us to notice what we might otherwise overlook, to confront dynamics we take for granted, simply because they don't affect us directly. If we are serious about the future of the TLN, we need to dedicate our time to engage with these questions together, not as isolated reflections, but as a living conversation that can guide how we grow, connect, and care for one another as a community.

CHAPTER 10

Learning from the movements

Anne Harley & Jon Langdon

Only those who have lived, suffered, thought deeply, loved profoundly, known joy and the tragic penumbra of things tell truly wonderful stories – *Ben Okri*

1. Our story

We start this chapter with our individual stories, and our joint story. Part of this story is how we met the movements that we have been engaged with, and whose stories appear earlier in the book.

Jon has a deep connection with the continent of Africa, having lived in Kenya for several years as a child, and having spent many years in adulthood living and working in Ghana; he also has a long connection with community and activist organising, having been involved with movement organising in Ghana as well as in Canada before completing his PhD, which focuses on learning in such activist spaces.

He began working with the Songor struggle in 2004, after meeting Radio Ada community broadcasters; he connected with the resistance to large scale gold mining in Talensi in 2013 in collaboration with Coleman Agyeyomah. He connected with CCDA and their work in Guatemala through a research trip with Wojciech Tokarz in 2015; finally, he connected with Abahlali and Church Land Programme through Anne Harley, after they met at the 2012 SCUTREA conference in Glasgow.

Anne grew up in apartheid South Africa, privileged through her class and race, but with a clear understanding of the evil of apartheid from her mother who was involved in (White) opposition politics. After a period of research work for NGOs on issues



Jon and Anne meeting up in
South Africa in 2023

of political violence and land restitution in the early 1990s, Anne joined the Centre for Adult Education at what is now the University of KwaZulu-Natal. In her teaching, she consciously drew on struggle movements and politics, becoming aware of Abahlali baseMjondolo as it emerged in 2005. She invited members of the movement to speak to her students, and subsequently members of Abahlali became students on a course she ran, with the support of the Church Land Programme.

Anne became aware of the Songor struggle through a piece co-written by Jon, Sheena and Kofi Lahweh (who was involved with Radio Ada at this time), which she used in one of her courses; meeting Jon at SCUTREA allowed for a deeper engagement with his work and this struggle, and she co-hosted Jon (with the Church Land Programme) to speak about the struggle when he visited South Africa in 2016.

In 2018, Jon and activists involved in the Songor struggle visited South Africa, where they spoke about the Songor struggle at the Church Land Programme and at the Popular Education Network conference, and also met with Abahlali; in 2019, Anne and members of Abahlali travelled to Ghana, including Ada and the Songor; and, as discussed elsewhere in the book, we have also

recently (2025) come together as a network in South Africa.

Our engagement with the movements, with Radio Ada, and with the Church Land Programme, have profoundly affected our lives, our thinking, our work, our stories.

2. Learning from the movements

We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives – *Ben Okri*

Over the years, we have learned a great deal from our engagement with movements, from hearing their stories. We would argue, from this engagement, and from the movement stories in this book and the learnings that have been identified from each of the chapters, that they are important sources of teaching about rooted resistance on their own terms, not as analogies of efforts at social change from elsewhere. Below, we summarise what we think can be learned from these teachings in more detail.

To retell the story of ‘development’

Even those who consider ourselves as part of the anti-neoliberal movement often form ‘partnerships’ with local government or civil society organisations complicit in delivering a particular kind of ‘development’ (possibly even a ‘participatory’ one). The movements in this book challenge us to think again. As is clear from their stories, they are made up of precisely those who are targeted by (neoliberal) ‘development’, and experience it directly. This ‘development’ harms their lives – as the different chapters show, it separates people from their land, from their livelihoods, from each other, from the environment, from their ancestors. As is evident, much of the story of the dominant, destructive idea of what ‘development’ is, is really a story of extractive industries. We need a different ‘development’, that builds people’s lives, and enriches the earth around them, that respects the right of people to say “no” and have their decisions and voice be respected, that treats **all** people with dignity.

This desire to retell the story of development is revealed most

tellingly in the chapter focusing on Talensi, Northern Ghana, and well as the chapter about Río Negro in Guatemala. In the case of the Río Negro story, the most blatant example of the draconian nature of development is documented. An entire community is targeted first with coercion, and then with violence because they had the audacity to say “no” and to stand in the way of ‘development’ in the form of a hydroelectric dam. The chaos of civil conflict is shown through this account to be a smokescreen to hide the agenda of the government, and their World Bank funders, to remove this community as an obstacle for the ‘development’ they would enact no matter the cost.

The Talensi chapters are equally damning accounts of ‘development’ without the people; despite an initial period where mining development was envisioned as a small-scale operation with only local miners – a period that could have been regulated with attention to the impact of this industry on other livelihoods – was undermined through back channels and bribery, not to mention several deaths to local miners, to turn the area into a large-scale mining concession. Local organising has continued to insist another way is possible, but successive governments seem deaf to these voices, and the concrete potential they represent.

As is evident from the stories, much of the movements’ growing disillusionment with the State relates to ‘development’, and how it happens. Neoliberal capitalism tends to be accompanied by very particular ideas about what development is, and how it should happen. This kind of development is predicated on certain basic assumptions about the nature of development, and the nature of poverty, and the nature of being. It is also, of course, related to the politics of liberal democracy. Abahlali’s call for development with respect and dignity is clearly related to this. It is the knowledge emergent from the movements’ direct experience that is the basis for an ongoing analysis of how to contend with the neoliberal state.

To retell the story of liberal democracy

The movement stories question the notion of liberal democracy as something that truly represents ‘the people’; and indeed, the stories are often stories of direct, extreme state violence against ‘the

people’, or stories of corruption in which political representatives precisely abandon the interests of those whom they are supposed to represent. They contrast this (non)representative politics with a different kind of politics, the one they are engaged with every day (rather than now and then at the polls). This thinking challenges notions of citizenship and State-centric tendencies, as well as development plans made without their involvement. Dialogue-based processes move from forms of representative politics to mass political action, all with an eye towards articulating an alternative path. Liberal democracies create individual moments of participation in decision-making, whereas dialogue-based ones are always open – engaging even with members of communities who disagree with a movement. The movements thus potentially create a different political space, which is not only open to everyone, but which works from the simple assertion that everyone can think – about their lives and why they are the way they are, and what should be done about this. This is why it is so obvious they should be involved in discussions and decisions about their lives.

Though this retelling of what liberal democracy means to these movements surfaces in most of the chapters, it is revealed in its starkest form in the chapter by Church Land Programme, and the ways in which electoral politics has failed to lead to a new relationship with those who govern, despite the end of apartheid, and even with the recent reduction of the ANC to a minority government situation where they have been forced to work in a coalition. As the title of this chapter indicates, the players change but the game remains the same.

Across the chapters, it is also evident that the justice system within many liberal democracies does not protect the people against their government or big business.

To retell the story of difference

Whilst the movements organise around a particular identity, this identity is not placed above others; rather, the movements understand that by improving their particular situation, they are consciously improving the lot for all. The movements thus center a common sense of humanity.

This sense of humanity rests on an axiom of equality – all human beings are equally important. This is not a colonising version of sameness determined from above, but one where difference is accepted because we share the commonality of all living beings. This invites a coming together to face oppression.

The CLP chapter again shares an apt display of this form of retelling of difference, where, despite the women of Sekwanele insisting on their right as women to be heard, their ultimate argument for the betterment of their community is to improve the lot of everyone, not just their own situation.

To retell the story of ‘thought’ and thinking

Knowledge production, theorising, praxis are all central to the movements that have contributed to this book. The movements are absolutely insistent that they think, and that the rejection or manipulation of this by state, media and other institutional structures is about ‘keeping them in their place.’ Retelling who thinks is thus an important part of their stories. This form of retelling can be seen again across most of the chapters, but comes across clearly in the chapter by Radio Ada, in southern Ghana, and by Abahlali baseMjondolo, in South Africa. The Abahlali chapter spells this out, by insisting that their movement thinks, and that they have their own theories and ideas about development and what actions would be best for their communities. They articulate this consistently in the face of an oppressive state apparatus, but also in the face of an NGO community that repeatedly suggests they are being manipulated by an outside force.

Radio Ada, in their chapter, share how they have continued to build spaces of community dialogue and mutual learning in the face of large-scale corporate and government plans, and have used the airwaves to broadcast this community learning to challenge the monopoly of thinking presented by those with power.

The assertion by movements, that people think, that everyone, as Gramsci insisted, is an intellectual, is one of their most fundamental teachings. Thinking, of course, results in theorising, understanding, new knowledge, as well as in new action. Praxis is continually generated through the ongoing engagement of

theorising and action. People who can think (i.e. everyone) have something to say, and agency to act in the world, and they are perfectly able to do this for themselves. This is precisely why the movements insist on their right to discuss and decide on their own ‘development’, and ignoring this by those in power is often the root cause behind the protest actions discussed in many of the chapters.

To this we also add the learning and reflection that has come horizontally by working with other similar movements in other parts of the world – and that this translocal learning holds a special potential in creating connection as it is peer-based.

To retell the story of social movements

As discussed in Chapter 1, social movements appear to be a growing phenomenon, and there has been increasing attention paid to them by a number of disciplines over the last few decades. Many argue that social movements are an important mechanism for social change in many different contexts. However, many social movements are, in Gramscian terms, part of a civil society whose function it is to create and consolidate the hegemony of the ruling class (Chatterjee, 2001; Hearne, 2001). In the current context, this class is capital, often as represented and protected by a nationalist state as well as ongoing colonial relations (Hearne, 2001). They are thus part of an educative process of learned hegemony. Some social movements, on the other hand, constitute a useful and important site of/for emancipation, because they appear to have resisted existing neoliberal hegemony, and have constructed or are attempting to construct an alternative. This is clearly the case for the social movements that have contributed to this book. These social movements are what we would term subaltern social movements; they operate ‘out of order’, out of the place to which they have been assigned. Their learning, and therefore teaching, is different. It derives from thinking their lived experience, from thinking and learning through their struggle, by themselves, for themselves. It is these social movements that offer the possibility of something new, and learning from their learning is therefore useful.

What we can learn from them and what they learn from each

other, as we have discussed above, is thus also about the very nature of social movements and social movement learning.

3. From social movement learning to subaltern social movement learning

Social movement learning (SML) has become, in recent years, a growing focus in critical education (indeed, Holst (2018, p.77) argues that ‘social movement learning has replaced radical adult education in our discourse’). In fact, English and Mayo (2012, p. 110) note that SML has ‘enormous...breadth’ as a field of study. For instance, there is geographic breadth (ranging from Latin America, through North America and Europe to the Indian subcontinent and Australia), theoretical breadth (ranging from Marxist, Neo-Marxist, Poststructural to Post-Colonial), and breadth of focus (ranging from New Social Movements, Old Social Movements to Indigenous movements to Anarchist formations). There is also breadth in terms of the focus on learning and movements. Holst (2002) notes that one way to analyze SML is the learning happening within movements, and the learning they provoke in broader society. Foley (1999) on the other hand focuses on the incidental learning dynamic as it emerges through struggle and reflection. In our own work, we have expanded Foley’s learning in struggle to also include the ways in which movements theorise their own learning – through spaces and processes of reflection on the struggle as well as learning the struggle.

However, we have a number of concerns about writings about social movement learning. The first is the way theories of learning in social movements are often derived from academics studying them as opposed to emerging from movements themselves. Choudry and Kapoor (2010) provide an important distinction between social movement learning studies that are academic-driven versus ones that are movement-driven. Kane (2001) has also underscored the importance of the theorization of learning being derived from movements themselves. Barker and Cox (2002) echo our concern about applying theory to movements instead of looking at how movements develop their own theories. They further note the dangers of academics appropriat-

ing movement-derived theories – a concern we share, and part of the reason we have based this chapter on dialogue emergent from the translocal network.

As Shirley Walters (2005) notes, social movements must be analyzed based on their own context. Our second concern, as Hall and Turray (2006) note, is the absence of research on African social movement learning. Whilst the field has developed somewhat since 2006, it remains true that there is relatively little work on the African experience compared to, for example, Latin America. This absence of research rooted in the continent is important, especially given the tendency of social movement literature to analyse movements outside of the Global North/West through a Euro-American theoretical lens (Kapoor, 2009a). Mamdani further underscores the importance of not analogising African phenomena to other histories/contexts:

I seek neither to set the African experience apart as exceptional and exotic nor to absorb it in a broad corpus of theory as routine and banal. For both, it seems to me, are different ways of dismissing it. In contrast, I try to underline the specificity of the African experience, or at least a slice of it. This is not an argument against comparative study but against those who would dehistoricise phenomena by lifting them from context, whether in the name of abstract universalism or of an intimate particularism, only to make sense of them by analogy. In contrast, my endeavour is to establish the historical legitimacy of Africa as a unit of analysis. (1996, p. 13)

The legitimacy of Africa as a unit of analysis must be insisted on all the more in the SML context because of its absence from current conversations.

Finally, the third concern we have, as we have already alluded to, is the way in which social movements as a category are so loosely defined as to put fundamentalist and racist reactionary movements in the same category as movements fighting for the emancipation of people, and greater inclusivity. Philip McMichael (2009) notes

this problematic, and calls for a clearer definition of social movements focused on social change that is outward looking, and not exclusionary and hate-based. At the same time, we feel a further refinement is needed, as liberal, reformist movements that often coopt Indigenous and subaltern voices (Choudry, 2008) can too easily fill the void.

As stated earlier, our learning from the different movements presented in this book has led us to understand these movements as subaltern social movements (SSMs). The notion of ‘subaltern social movements’ derives from Gramsci’s use of the terms ‘subaltern’ and ‘subaltern consciousness’ to refer to those who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling class, and their thinking; and more recently, from subaltern studies, which emerged in the early 1980s with the work of Ranajit Guha (1983), Gayatri Spivak (1988) and later that of Walter D. Mignolo (1999). Subaltern studies is a body of work showing how, within the colonial context, popular movements in resistance to colonialism “have continued to exist vigorously and even develop new forms and content” (Ludden, 2005, cited in Kapoor, 2007, p.35). Mignolo specifically brings into the dialogue the work of Gramsci and Foucault in looking at subjugated or ‘border’ knowledges – knowledges which operate on the borders of the modern/colonial world system, and have been subjugated by this system, but by their very existence also challenge modern/colonial hegemony.

Whilst ‘subaltern’ is clearly a category in relation to power, it is not a substitute for other social or political categories, such as peasant, or poor, or proletariat (or lumpenproletariat); although, as Kapoor (2007) argues, it is frequently collapsed into these, or appropriated into pre-existing notions of class/‘civil society’/identity politics/rights-based discourse:

The portability of... Eurocentric-theoretical projects that have emerged in industrial contexts in questionable, both in terms of possible epistemic colonizations (a tendency to speak for all spaces, peoples/cultures, and times) or in terms of the insensitivity to the contextual embeddedness of theorising when applied to rural and peripheral move-

ments in recently independent nations and regions. Radical adult education scholarship is largely oblivious to the coloniality of these contexts and their distinct internal/culturally specific onto-political orientations (Kapoor, 2003, cited in Kapoor, 2007, pp.33-34).

There is thus a strong focus on the ways in which learning is emerging in the subaltern social movement studies of Kapoor (2007; 2009a; 2009b). Similarly, Choudry (2008; 2010) has documented how subaltern Indigenous movements within the anti-globalization movement produce knowledge, but also how this knowledge is co-opted by mainstream movements – denying the origins of its own knowledge production processes. This is one of the reasons why the subaltern social movements included in this book are both producing their own knowledge, but also insisting on their right to theorise this learning.

Our own learning from the stories and thinking presented by the movements in this book, as discussed above, have resulted in a tentative identification of what makes a social movement a subaltern social movement. We believe that subaltern social movements are:

1. *Rooted in grassroots organising, and remain accountable to that, over time.* This means that subaltern social movements are always fluid and shifting; they are by their very nature temporal, rooted in the burning issues, historical struggles, and the analysis of their members. Movements must thus be seen through their own eyes, and their own contexts, rather than a Euro-American dominated set of lenses of movement interpretation. The examples shared here clearly show how movements define their own reality. The Radio Ada chapter shares this most aptly, as it describes different iterations of the movement struggling, from the salt cooperatives of the 1980s to the Yihi Katseme to the most recent Ada Songor Lagoon Association.

2. *Integrally connected to people's livelihoods.* The Talensi community organising against the takeover of large-scale mines is a good example of this as it was led, in many ways, by the small-scale

miners' association – a group that has literally had their livelihood stripped from them through government reversal of policy. Thus, as Kapoor (2009b) points out, subaltern movements frequently express their struggle as related to actual material conditions. However, by livelihoods, we do not simply mean 'jobs' or work for income, but rather the 'doing' (as Holloway (2010) discusses it) that is necessary for both social reproduction and for being fully human. That is, the physical work of production of food, clothing, shelter, and so on, but also of care and nurturing, and the social, creative and emotional work of building and maintaining human relationships, communities and cultures of loving, belonging and creating. This is why retelling the story of 'development' is so important – because, so often, 'development' actually undermines livelihoods in this broader sense, as the stories of Rio Negro, the Songor, and Abahlali show so clearly. Indeed, 'development' often precisely restricts 'livelihood' to wage labour; and SSM struggles can be seen as a refusal to allow the undermining of the 'doing' that makes us fully human.

3. Connected to a strong sense of identity, and committed to protecting this. This sense of identity is neither exclusionary nor elitist; there is no central authority determining insiders and outsiders, although there are insiders and outsiders – there is a boundary, but this is relatively porous, and resists colonial boundaries and constructions of identity. Identity in this sense is about the singularity and temporality of experience; but contains within it the possibility of universality. It is a sense of identity that does not deny or negate the humanity of others. As was discussed above, the CLP chapter shares the story of the women from Sekwanele who organised to insist their voices be heard in community decision-making, but also worked to improve their community for all. The struggle in the Songor has similarly not been exclusionary, but for the right of anyone to win salt.

4. Non-partisan, in the sense that subaltern movements occupy a different political territory from the political party. This is not to suggest that such movements are not deeply 'political.' Indeed, subaltern

movements are inherently ‘political,’ occupying the space of real, living politics, rather than that of the ‘police,’ as Rancière (1999) frames it: “Politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part. Beyond this set up there is no politics. There is only the order of domination [and the police] or the disorder of revolt” (p.11). In this sense, politics links the singular and the universal: “Politics...is the art of the local and singular construction of cases of universality” (Rancière, 1999, p.139). It is also not to suggest that subaltern movements are not concerned with party politics (which affects their lives), or will not strategically align themselves to political parties, whilst retaining their autonomy. As Kapoor (2009b, p.33) points out, “subalterns are subjects of history and makers of their own destiny”; in their particular contexts of historic struggle, they will make strategic utilizations, including of other discourses. This position of being engaged in politics, but refusing to be drawn into a client relationship with partisan political parties is at the heart of the Abahlali chapter. While the movement may make strategic decisions with regards to such parties, they always insist they are the makers of their own destiny.

The stories across the chapters in this book show that for SSMs, real politics is about organising communally, from below.

5. *Ontologically spaces of learning.* By this we mean, it is the very nature of such movements to think their experience and their politics; and therefore to challenge pre-existing truth-procedures and ideologies, and to create new epistemologies. Because of the temporal nature of subaltern movements, their thinking and learning is fluid. It is for this reason that many of the stories in this book show the importance of history, of understanding the shifts and changes and processes and responses of an ongoing struggle; this is perhaps most evident in the CCDA chapter, which reveals a commitment to the ongoing learning of their struggle by keeping these stories of violent oppression alive, refusing to allow them to be forgotten.

5. Restorying reality

The worst realities of our age are manufactured realities. It is therefore our task, as creative participants in the universe, to redream our world. The fact of possessing imagination means that everything can be redreamed. Each reality can have its alternative possibilities – *Ben Okri*

As we hope is clear from our reflections in this chapter (and from the book itself!), subaltern social movements and their struggles are messy, contested, complex, precisely because they are a rupture of what already is. They are a reimagining, a new story. It is, in effect, precisely this that allows for the emergence of important new learning and teaching.

It should also be clear that such movements are necessarily moving, fluid, temporal – they change, morph, as the context shifts, which is why it is never guaranteed that a movement will remain a subaltern movement. What is essential for them to remain subaltern social movements, as we understand this, is that they remain rooted in the struggle from which the movement emerged. If they do not – if, for example, they shift because of the people involved, because of the leaders, because of the government currently in power – then they become institutionalised, NGOised. The reimagining ends. The story becomes the same. In our understanding, movements thus need to retain fidelity to the new story, to the event of their struggle (Badiou, 2005). This is work that is more necessary than ever, but it is hard and dangerous work.

CHAPTER 11

Concluding thoughts for now

The Translocal Learning Network

As we were finalising this book our network had the opportunity to come together in person for the very first time. This may seem surprising, and several of us have met one-on-one in other contexts, but for a number of us it was the first time meeting, and for all of us, it was the first time our network had met with almost every partner represented.

We met in Johannesburg, South Africa from 15-21 August 2025 for a network retreat, as well as to attend an international conference on system transformation. Or at least most of us met up in Johannesburg. As Leocadio Juracán from CCDA left customs and security at La Aurora airport in Guatemala city, he was arrested by officials claiming he was trying to flee the country in the face of an arrest warrant he was not even aware of. As so many members



Arriving at our retreat in Johannesburg



Solidarity actions organised by TLN at the Transformations conference

of our network have experienced, officials can lie and make up stories, whereas our members have their truths questioned, undermined and even criminalised.

In the few years since our network started, partner representatives in Ghana, in South Africa and now in Guatemala have experienced this first hand. For instance, Mqapheli Bonono of Abahlali was arrested and detained for weeks on a set of charges the South African state eventually dropped; Noah Dameh, of blessed memory, paid the ultimate price for this work, passing on after facing false charges he was fighting in court, and getting sick while incarcerated. Leocadio is added to this list – a deeply personalised indication of the cost of this work, even while all of these partners have faced wider scale targeting and intimidation, and even attacks.

So it was a bittersweet moment when we came together at St. Benedict's Anglican retreat in Johannesburg's working class neighborhood Rosettenville, to behold each other in the flesh; members of our network who were meeting in real life for the first time embraced as if old friends. The many hours we have spent together meeting online over the past several years had already built close relationships.



Poster produced by TLN at the Transformations conference
to support Leocadio

As we met up, all of us listened to each other's stories of the road, and the tribulations our members experienced along the way. The Ghanaian delegation were asked additional questions by drug enforcement officers, for instance. It was clear, though, from that first day together that our gathering was built on a solid foundation, but at the same time the post-meeting reflections this chapter is based on describe our gathering as moving us from a network to a community.

In our post-meeting reflections, we asked ourselves three questions: where are we as a network, where are we going, and what should we say in this conclusion of our book. What we share here is the ways we overlapped in our responses, as well as some of the unique ways we answered outside the overlap. Given this is the conclusion, we begin with our thoughts on what should be shared in it.

What should we say in this conclusion?

First and foremost, we wanted to share our reflections on where we are as a network, and where we are going. This was the dominant thought of our group. There were different ideas as to why these thoughts are important to share. Some thought it was a way to make it clear how we see ourselves in the concluding moments of the production of this book – a marker in time that we can look back



Visiting Abahlali Lindokuhle Mnguni branch in Johannesburg

at; others felt it was a way to make the very tangible relationality that emerged over the course of our time in South Africa together stand out for readers to see. Where the rest of the book may share stories or struggle, and the ways in which we have learned from each other, this part can share how we are together as a community, and how that was deepened through both the ways we stand with each other in times of persecution, but also the ways we joked and laughed with each other while sharing space in Johannesburg.

This flows well into another common thread of what we said should be in this conclusion: a personal reflection of what this space has meant and continues to mean for its members. This is balanced, in people's descriptions, with a reflection of what it has meant collectively – but the personal is singled out by a couple of our members for the way they have learned so much as people involved in our community. Ro, for example, shared:

In the three years that I've been involved in the network, I have felt really lost and oftentimes out of place in our dynamic. When I first began, my role in the dynamic beyond that of a research assistant was unclear to me, which made it difficult for me to see how the network's dynamic could



Leocadio joining us virtually at the Transformations conference after his release

be truly horizontal. I thought of myself as one of many research assistants before me – temporary and tangential. Similarly I imagined my involvement with the network as a stepping stone, a brief period of a much longer career in who-knows-what. When CCDA came in and I became a lot more essential as a translator, I started to understand myself as a more integral part of the dynamic and felt more comfortable taking more space. Suddenly, my commitment to the network was bigger, my functions felt more important, and I felt inclined to invest more of myself into the work. Still, I was mostly doing what was necessary for me to be good at my job as a research assistant, but I did not invest myself in deepening my relationship with the partners beyond work. Being exclusively online certainly didn't help either.

After our trip to Johannesburg everything has changed for me. Having met the partners I feel a lot closer to them. It feels a lot more like a community. We talk about our families, we joke together, we share snacks, we drink, we cope with The Horrors™, we debate, and we work in teams



Leocadio joining us virtually at the Transformations conference after his release

and talk about our struggles. These are the building blocks of collective resistance: not just working together, but being together in resistance and learning.

Though more centred on the gathering in Johannesburg, Eddie also reflected the personal impact of our coming together:

Our meeting in South Africa was historic. Although it was brief, its impact will never fade away. We have become a global family, so glued together in our noble and resilient quest for freedom, justice, peace and security that it was extremely painful to say goodbye as we left in batches for our various homes at the close of the conference.

I must confess I became extremely lonely when the post-conference departures began on Thursday. It was difficult to swallow the supper.

The sense of mission, and being glued together, is a perfect segue into the third major overlap in what people wanted this final chapter to share: that this is our agenda, our stories, and our commitment to each other. No one is remote-guiding this network; even though

it may be a lengthy and time-consuming process, we determine things through collective deliberation, and work to maintain a non-hierarchical atmosphere. Yen describes this feeling well:

The group has also shown a strong commitment to transparency. Decisions are made collectively, and everyone has the space to contribute freely. There is accountability and a clear sense of belonging across organisations.

Keeping this going will be important. As Sheena notes, “we need to continue to reflect on the power and privilege and non-hierarchical structure of our network and collective decision-making.” This is a process that doesn’t end, but in our own way, we try to find ways to do this: for instance by sharing skills, or by using humour to both point out power that exists, but also destabilise it. This was exemplified in Johannesburg by describing everything as being Jon’s fault – from Leocadio’s arrest, to wonderful moments of connection between us. This joke allowed us to both acknowledge the power dynamic of Jon as a researcher with access to our grant, but also the ways we all (including Jon) actively work to ensure we live up to Yen’s description above.

This transitions nicely into where we think we are as a collective.

Where we are

Across the board, all of us described our network as stronger than ever after meeting in Johannesburg, but also as we rose to support Leocadio who was prevented from joining us. In fact, these two points describe the strength we feel:

1) Our consistent solidarity with each other, showing up in many different ways, but always being there. Thapelo encapsulates this feeling when he says:

Solidarity has been our strength. Comrades, we were there when we lost a comrade in the struggle. Comrades like Lindokuhle Mnguni and Noah Dameh were killed by the brutal system. We did not only show solidarity in statements, but we met online to see how we can show respect to these comrades.

We were there for each other when our comrades were detained under false charges by our governments. When Comrade Mqapheli Bonono was arrested for a trumped-up charge there were solidarity messages from the network. When Comrade Noah was also arrested for such we were there. We are here now when our Comrade Leocadio Juracan Salome is facing a brutal state in Guatemala. We will continue to be there for each other.

2) We have been consistent in our collective commitment to this network, over years of meeting online, but this has been deepened even more in the efforts we all made to come together in person in South Africa. Zodwa captures the way our collective coming together surprised her:

If I pause for a moment and look back on these past few years with Translocal Learning, I see a journey I could never have imagined before I joined. I've been exposed to struggles I didn't even know existed, struggles carried quietly, far from the headlines, but deeply rooted in the earth and in people's lives. And through those struggles, I've come to understand a word that over the years has lost its true meaning to me: 'comrade.'

At CLP, we call it living solidarity. It's not a slogan, not something to put on a banner – it's something you feel in the marrow of your bones. It's the knowing that when one of us is facing challenges, all hands are on deck. It's the unspoken promise that when one voice trembles, many will rise around it. In a world where even so-called 'liberated spaces' (spaces outside mainstream party politics) often fail to hold, we've managed to create something rare here: a collective heart that beats across distances. For that, I carry a deep gratitude too deep for easy words.

While we acknowledged we have work to do in terms of making our network, as well as potentially the movements/struggles we are a part of, more inclusive and representative of those impacted by

the struggles, we also noted along with Anne that we are “a very diverse group ... in terms of the usual metrics – age, gender, race, etc.” Yet, many of us agreed with her that “that’s not the basis on which we became part of the network [...] it’s about the values and commitments we share, and these always extend beyond these kind of identities” – the values of standing not only as/with those directly impacted by oppressive systems of exploitation and extraction, but also as/with those who are able to speak and think about our own struggles.

And yet these identities also imply differences – different words, different languages, different histories of struggle. Amanor describes that these differences exist, but we find a way to see our struggles as the same: “We are a community of like-minded people from different societies [...] Different countries, continents and contexts, yet the same struggle.” And this brings us back to the actions we have all been willing to take, the work we have all been willing to do to make this more than a network. Ro describes this well, acknowledging the difficulties and even dangers in this work:

More than a learning network, we have become a very active solidarity network. We have faced some great hardships to get here. In our everyday struggles organising, the lives of some are in constant threat: our partners have been persecuted, arrested, and one even died from fighting. Getting together to talk can be logistically difficult and even dangerous: whether it be normal things like a poor wifi connection, the pain of going through a visa application process, or the very real risk of getting arrested at an airport.

Along these same lines Amanor sums it up, “We are not an island; we are a community through solidarity.”

Where are we going

It is fitting to think of where we are going as a community, as a network, at the end of this book, and at the end of this conclusion. Sheena notes that when we came together in Johannesburg, it “was the end of a chapter;” there were open questions as to who would stay in the network, where we might next look for funding

rather than the sources from the Global North, and who we might invite to join our translocal gatherings. We didn't finally resolve any of these questions while together in South Africa, but we did move the discussion of each forward. Several of us commented on wanting the network to grow, but to do so organically, and in different ways. Wojciech, for instance, notes, "I would love for us to grow – not by expanding membership, but by deepening the relationships we already share." Anne, meanwhile says, in terms of expanding, "my own feeling is that we do not deliberately set out to do this – it *has* to happen organically, through relationships." Amanor says, "In the future, I hope the door of our movement will be open to accept other like-minded social movements." Yen notes that we may have some flexibility in how this happens:

As the group expands, and with access to resources, we can broaden our networking to include other organisations. Networking can take many forms: some groups may formally join the network, while others may simply collaborate with us or offer mutual support when needed.

For some, expansion needs to be in particular directions: "We discussed how we need more women and to continue to challenge ourselves to integrate queer people in our various movements and to confront our own thinking about it," Sheena notes. Zodwa sums up the feeling that we need to do this our own way, through walking together:

CLP reminds us often: "we make the path by walking." That line has never felt truer than it does now. I believe where we are going cannot be mapped out neatly on paper. There is no grand blueprint waiting for us; instead, the path emerges beneath our feet as we move. It bends and shifts, guided by the struggles we're part of, by the silences we're learning to break, and by the questions we dare to ask.

We don't need to pre-empt the destination. To do so would betray the organic nature of what we are building. What matters is that we stay rooted in the ground beneath us,

attentive to the wisdom carried by each struggle, each story, each act of resistance.

In this sense, we have given ourselves the time to finish this book project, but we are also working on podcasts that will spread the stories and learnings shared in these pages through several languages – Mayan-achi, isiZulu, Dangbe, Talensi, Mi’kmaq, Spanish and English. Ro captures this feeling well, “We have a lot of work to do. The podcasts need to be finished and then used for movement building. We are obviously finishing this book and then we’ll have to promote it in our communities.” But Ro goes on to add they hope we are beginning a new chapter where our community can also, “share skills with each other, not just stories. Just like we will be learning podcasting skills together, we could teach each other basic language skills in each other’s languages to make communication easier between each other, even if just in casual conversation.” Yen notes that we need to work on ourselves as a network as well, “It will also be important to clarify our mission and agree on the strategic goals we want to pursue.” Along similar lines, Anne asks, “in terms of the network itself, and our learning, I wonder whether we don’t need some kind of structured process to really push the challenging/learning?” She suggests an Afrocentric approach that would encourage us to unlearn some of our ways of thinking, and relearn them in new ways. She describes a process forward that we may follow:

Each partner take it in turns to reflect quite deeply on the last year (say), using ‘what we thought we had learned by the end of 2024 (in terms of the struggle we are engaged in; *and* the movement/organisation itself)’; ‘what we had to unlearn about this, and why’; ‘what we relearned, and why’. This **SHOULD** promote honest reflection, but also allow for challenging questions from others?

Ro suggests an additional direction we could go in our future meetings:

I can also feel us getting closer and think it would be great to explore that closeness. What if we shared a little more

about ourselves and how we got involved in the movements in which we are in? We have some legends amongst us with incredible stories to tell, and there is something to learn in everyone's life experiences. What if we talked about our emotions more often? Being in this line of work is very difficult and how awesome it is to know that others around the world are willing to give you a hug and share a beer to talk because they are as worn down and exhausted as you are.

Both of these directions seem poised to yield rich growth and a deepening of our strength as a network, and an increase of our solidarity with each other. As we left South Africa, reflecting on this time, learning that Leocadio was at least released from detention – even as he still faces a manufactured charge – there was hope in many of our steps. Zodwa's thoughts capture this positive feeling well, and are a great way to end this chapter and this book:

If there's one thing worth celebrating, it's this: despite being scattered across geographies, despite living most of our collective life through flickering screens, we've managed to become more than just a network – we've become a community. Somehow, in the spaces between bandwidth drops and muted microphones, friendships have formed. We've come to know each other's struggles and strengths, to witness one another not just as activists or researchers, but as human beings – vulnerable, resilient, becoming.

Even online, we've learned to hold space for one another. And maybe that is the quiet proof that solidarity doesn't depend on proximity; it depends on intention, on care, on trust.

We would like to acknowledge the work of Kofi Larweh and S'bu Zikode in a much earlier, and rather different, version of this. Their engagement helped us in our thinking about subaltern social movements.

We dedicate this chapter to the many in the movements we have learned from who have died in the struggle for something better – and give thanks for their love, their generosity, their creativity, their stories, from which we can all learn to reimagine and redream.

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